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NO SECRET
EVIL-FIGHTING
ORGANIZATION**

(SRSLY?!) So I
**MADE ONE
MYSELF!**

AUTHOR: HAGANE KURODOME
ILLUSTRATOR: KATTO

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[[SRP Y?!]]

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Shiori Kaburagi
Secret organization
Amaterasu's
Pretty lady
sub-leader

*"No, this is just
my casual wear.
I like dressing
myself up. See,
I can even do *this*
in this outfit."*



Lonalia
Linalia Baba-Nyan

Otherworlder
who appears before
Kinemitsu Sago

This was a secret project, after all.
No one must be allowed to catch on.

“.....I’m
running
out of
time.”

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Chapter 1: The Painfully Mistaken Search Result

Fifth planet of the Supersolar System, Jadesphere. This planet that overflowed with vegetation was home to a large number of countries. Among them was Alvu Kingdom, which had been ruled by Queen Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan for the past 700 years.

High above the clouds, within the palace carved into one of the gigantic trees that made up the planet's expansive canopy, there sat Baba-Nyan listlessly on the throne inside her royal office, cheerlessly lending half an ear to a report about the dismantling of a certain international smuggling ring. Baba-Nyan belonged to a bipedal race, and had the appearance of a child. Her beautiful, long silver hair was done up in a four-stranded braid, and decorated with a branch from the oldest tree in the world as an indication of her status as the sovereign over an entire race of people. Her long ears, which were said to be capable of hearing the voices of the gods in the olden days, stood up perkily like fresh leaves, and the jade color in her eyes was as deep as the forest. The thin garment that she had on, woven from water and wind, loosely and comfortably enveloped her tiny build.

"Um, so yeah, about the smuggling ring, basically we caught all of them in one fell swoop. We descended on them with such force and vigor that not even a single piece of chaff got away, yeah."

"What of our casualties?"

"Pretty much none, yeah. Wasn't it Baba-sama who said that we could take as much time as we need to suppress the probability of casualties?" replied Soliana (about 750 years old) in a casual tone, without even looking up from the report in her hands. She was Baba-Nyan's cousin, as well as her right-hand woman.

For someone of the Alvu race, her growth had stopped at a relatively late stage, such that her figure was that of an adult woman. In fact, if Baba-Nyan's growth had stopped at the same age, then the two might have looked exactly

the same. Instead of a four-stranded braid, Soliana's hair was done in a three-stranded braid, and the decorative branch in her hair was that of a normal ancient tree.

“And what they were smuggling has been retrieved, I trust?”

“Mhmm, we took extra care when taking the caged *demon lord* into custody. It was about to die of starvation, the poor thing. What a terrible thing to do to an endangered species.”

Upon hearing that, Baba-Nyan felt a deep sense of melancholy wash over her.

For the past few hundred years, the world had been at peace. Baba-Nyan was currently 900 years old as of this year. Ever since her coronation at 200, it had been her dream to one day, together with a hero who had come to seek help from the Alvu, set off on an adventure to defeat a demon lord plotting to conquer the world.

Long, long ago, demon lords had been calamity-level disasters who truly threatened the world. Having grown up listening to the epic tale of how her own mother, the previous queen, had gone on a harrowing and exciting journey to defeat a demon lord, Baba-Nyan's heart throbbed with the dream of going off on her own adventure one day. However, time passed, bringing with it advancements in magic, science, and military strategy. Gradually, demon lords went from calamity-level to disaster-level, from disaster-level to incident-level, then from incident-level to pest-level. Now, they were pitiful existences hunted and chased down as a form of entertainment for the rich and wealthy.



This was especially the case after resurrection insurance became common among the general populace. Just by paying the insurance premium, the insured were guaranteed to come back if they died. Therefore, the casualties that a demon lord could inflict were effectively reduced to zero.

In the current age, demon lords were considered an endangered species. The few that were still alive were protected in reserves or carefully fed and cared for in zoos. They were in no position to threaten the world in any way. Let alone saving other people by killing a demon lord, doing so would conversely bring down a rain of criticism and censure from conservation groups.

After being designated as an endangered species, conservation bureaus in governments all over the world warmly took them in and placed them under protection. However, at the same time, this designation served as an acknowledgment of their rarity, which caused their worth in the black market to rise sky-high. Consequently, the number of poachers also went up, some of whom managed to slip through the monitoring of those conservation groups and successfully hunt and sell demon lords. As a result, the number still alive actually decreased in the time since they became an endangered species. It was said that natural demon lords were going to become completely extinct in a few more years. It was getting to the point where the zoo was pretty much the only place where it would be possible to see one of them firsthand. That was why crushing this organization that dealt in the poaching and smuggling of demon lords was such an extremely important matter.

From Baba-Nyan's point of view, this was so terribly pitiable, so deplorable, and so tragic. The world was at peace. It was so peaceful that she wanted to die. The demon lords who had once caused the entire world to shake in fear were now merely advertisement material for zoos. The world had not seen fighting in 300 years, let alone full-blown war.

This was the fruit of Baba-Nyan's reign and the peacemaking policies enacted by countries all over the world. This was one of Baba-Nyan's proudest achievements as ruler of the Alvu, yet at the same time was also the greatest source of her vexation.

Baba-Nyan sighed. "Haah..... I too wanted to partake in the subjugation of a

demon lord. Why has the world become so terribly peaceful?”

“Peaceful is good, isn’t it? What don’t you like about it? I don’t get it at all.”

“I am the one who fails to comprehend your feelings, Soliana. When you read the epics and hear the legends, do you not feel the urge to also experience the same..... but why am I asking when I already know you don’t..... Haah.....”

“The only things I feel are, like, ‘Oh man, that sounds scary,’ or, like, ‘Boy am I glad I wasn’t born in such a dangerous era.’ I’m pretty sure all the citizens think the same. That’s why everything’s so peaceful.”

Soliana’s carefree words did nothing to curb Baba-Nyan’s sighs.

Baba-Nyan was the queen of Alvu Kingdom. As the queen, her people’s happiness and peace was her number one wish. She had devoted every effort toward that goal. Case in point, the strategy this time for crushing the smuggling ring was put into motion only after the most thorough of preparations were put into place. The goal was to eliminate the possibility of citizens being caught in the crossfire. At the same time, however, on the personal level, Baba-Nyan had never stopped yearning for a dangerous and thrilling adventure with the fate of the world hanging in the balance.

Baba-Nyan understood the price of peace. It was a tower built from heartfelt hopes, flowing blood, and swallowed tears, constructed one piece at a time by her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and ancestors as numerous as the stars. Surely there had been enormous setbacks along the way. Surely it must have felt like an impossible dream at times. Peace was a crystallization of an immeasurable amount of effort and sacrifice. It was a pricelessly precious thing.

But with that said, she still could not keep herself from wishing for some great threat that would cast a shadow of terror and despair over the entire world. She wanted to stand against such a threat.

However, the world was *too* peaceful. Let alone a world-threatening shadow, the only things that ever happened were smuggling, matrimonial quarrels, and the occasional murder case.

The previous queen, who had saved the world by defeating a demon lord

together with a hero, was nowadays obsessed with deep-sea fishing, spending most of her time on an automatic yacht in some random fishing village somewhere. When she visited home a few years ago, she had been proudly showing off her tan. Now “Hero” was now only an honorable title granted to the winners of a worldwide swordsmanship tournament. The bloody yet electrifying scene of a traditional clash between an evil demon lord and a hero joined by a devoted Alvu queen would never be seen again, could never be experienced again.

Out of the blue, it occurred to Baba-Nyan that she had never actually seen a demon lord in person before. After a brief moment of thinking, she asked, “Soliana, do you know where the demon lord is being detained as of now?”

“Umm, it’s at the customs house.”

“Think you whether I could go see it with mine own eyes?”

“Whaaat..... it’ll be difficult, I think. If you go see it, then the conservation groups are definitely going to raise a ruckus about you doing it as a publicity stunt for some political purpose. The bureau director of the customs house would also be quite reluctant, I think.”

“Is it not the duty of these conservation groups to raise commotions? It shall be sufficient to handle them as you see fit. As for the bureau director, perhaps he may be in need of some help with recalling by whose providence it was that he attained his lofty station 130 years ago.”

“Mmm, well, sure, all right. I’ll get all that done then, I guess. Oh right, please don’t challenge the demon lord to a fight as soon as you meet it, all right?”

“Mm. Rest assured, I shall not.”

Baba-Nyan was not a battle junkie. She did not make a pastime out of harassing poor beasts locked inside cages. What she was hoping for was closure on her long-held messiah complex by seeing one in person.

The next day, after all the various procedures had been completed, Baba-Nyan entered the Dangerous Goods Temporary Storage with Soliana in tow, both of them wearing commoner clothing. Within a cage made of magic alloy, a demon lord stirred and glared at them with evil-looking eyes.

“Ku ku ku.....”

The two observed the demon lord while listening to fear-inducing laughter that seemed to reverberate from the depths of hell. Having only seen stuffed ones before, Baba-Nyan’s impression was that a real one indeed emitted a thick aura of evilness that lived up to its reputation: it had a gigantic figure more than five times the size of Baba-Nyan’s own, a bulging muscular build, and skin tough enough to withstand even lava. Its swarthy dark skin, with all the black bristles on it, was highly popular as fabric for tailoring, and the curved horns on its head were a precious material used in antique furniture.

“Ku ku ku..... MUAH ha ha ha!”

It had already been a long time since groups of demon lords in the wild had gone extinct. This demon lord had most likely been wrested away from its parents while young, reduced to being an orphan with no family in the whole wide world. Having received no education from its parents, this demon lord did not know how to speak words, and was capable of only making simple sounds.

“Ohh..... how pitiable! Is this creature in such an abject state truly one that was touted as an ‘enemy of the world’ in times of old?” lamented Baba-Nyan while covering her face.

Demon lords may have indeed fallen in this day and age, but they had once reigned supreme as the most powerful beings in the entire world. Baba-Nyan had expected to feel some fear and menace when seeing one up close.

However, no such emotion stirred within her.

No matter how great the existence, eventually the progression of science and magic would catch up and exterminate it. Now she understood completely that the era when demon lords could still prove a real threat to the world was well and truly gone.

This threw Baba-Nyan into despair. If a demon lord, the very representative of a worldwide threat, was in such a pathetic state, then how on earth was she ever going to get her great adventure of sword and magic, with the fate of the world riding upon her shoulders? This world was growing more and more peaceful year by year. This was such an incredibly tremendous achievement, yet was also a source of such aggravation that it threatened to drive her mad.

The fights of boiling blood and burning passion that she yearned for were thankfully, and yet lamentably, never to occur again.

“.....And yet, I shall not give up my cause,” murmured Baba-Nyan while lifting her face. The look in her eyes caused the demon lord to retreat to the far side of its cage in fright.

After the many, many, many years of being sandwiched between wishing for peace and also waiting with bated breath for the appearance of a threat that would rock the world, her heart had ripened with a deep reserve of stress. This meeting with a demon lord was simply the final straw to something that had been a long time coming. The emotions that had been building up over an uncountable number of years finally exploded all at once.

“I am..... I am aflame with rage! Enough! I shall abide this banal world no longer! Soliana! I shall be going to another world, a world truly under threat from a demon lord most vile!”

The sight of Baba-Nyan flipping out seemingly out of the blue slightly creeped Soliana out as she responded candidly, “Whaaat..... what’s this all of a sudden. But Baba-sama, you’re the queen though, aren’t you? Who’s going to rule the Alvu if you’re gone?”

“It shall be *your* duty then, Soliana! Are you not the first in line for the throne?! After all your years of service by my side, you already know full well everything there is to know about how to rule! My days are filled with tears and sorrow in this world of peace, and I can bear to suffer them no longer! Danger there may be, and yet a world wherein I can adventure to my heart’s content is still a thousand times better! Think not that you can dissuade me!”

“Nah no worries, I won’t stop you. Guess I’ll be the queen then.”

With her vigor suddenly dissipating due to Soliana’s ready acquiescence, Baba-Nyan asked timidly, “You really will not dissuade me?”

“You’ve been queen for 700 entire years already. Isn’t it about time you get to do whatever you want to do? If you tell the people that that’s what you want to do, then I’m sure they won’t stop you either. I’ve also wanted to try on a branch of the world’s oldest tree at least once in my life. It’s something that probably all Alvu women have dreamed of before.”

“O-Ohhh.....! Thank you, Soliana!” Although Baba-Nyan’s words earlier had been spoken half on impulse, Soliana’s unexpected support seemed to have opened the door before her. Baba-Nyan’s eyes grew hot as she clutched her cousin’s hands.

Soliana smiled gently, saying, “Please don’t cry, Baba-sama. In order to go to another world, you will need to study for a Grade 1 Dimensional Travel License, apply for a permit from the World Monitoring Bureau, be quarantined for a thousand days for communicable disease prevention, undertake the International Dimensional Travel Bureau’s flight training simulation at least 80 times, and make a pledge before the Highest God. There is still a lot to do.”

“.....Now I truly feel the urge to cry. May I cry?”



The curious news of the queen of the Alvu, Queen Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan, abdicating her throne to travel to another world sent the whole world buzzing about with excitement.

The magical sciences of Jadesphere had already developed to the point where they had long since solved the mysteries of the multiverse, and it was very much possible to send people to another world. The act of doing so was indeed uncommon, but it wasn’t all that preposterous.

However, worlds have something very similar to immunization. Upon being breached by a visitor from another world, the breached world senses the foreign presence and consequently creates an invisible shell that prevents any further encroachments. This shell is utterly impervious against the most cutting-edge magical science, as well as any and all ultimate powers in any of the worlds. This is a fundamental law on the level of the worlds’ existences themselves.

After a world accepts something from another world, it would be absolutely impossible to send anything else into the world, and equally impossible to send anything out from that world. In simpler terms, every world can only accept one visitor. There are no exceptions.

This is something that cannot be overturned, even if someone has a power capable of erasing the entire universe with a single blink of an eye, a power

capable of altering time or fate, or even a power that can nullify and overwrite physical laws. This law of the worlds exists on a higher dimension than any and all other laws.

Consequently, in the case of Baba-Nyan going to another world, it meant it would be impossible to send anything else after her. It would also be impossible for her to come back to Jadesphere. Communication would also be impossible. If she went there once, she would be stuck on that world until she died. This was effectively a one-way ticket. It was a trip that would cost a huge amount of money and effort. The fact that such a highly esteemed queen who had such meritorious achievements to her name would discard her status to attempt such a troublesome journey gathered the attention of the entire world.

.....That was, until the heartwarming news of a baby demon lord being born in a zoo caught all their attention instead.

A celebratory mood seized Alvu Kingdom as all the citizens wished their blessings on the queen in her search to be happy, with no one particularly making any effort to stop her. While rushing about busily with all the various preparations and studying that she needed to do for the journey, Baba-Nyan found herself feeling quite conflicted about this reception.



After several years of an astonishing amount of annoying paperwork, rituals, pledges, studying, license exams, and so much more, Baba-Nyan finally found herself standing alone within a doorless white dome: the World Traveling Room, located inside the International Dimensional Travel Bureau's building. The path to this day had been so eventful that it made her feel like she had already had an entire journey. However, she pulled herself together, reminding herself that this was actually where everything was going to begin.

However, she soon found herself fidgeting restlessly and fiddling with her hair. The clothes that she was wearing were a simple white costume made of plant fiber that should not be a problem no matter which world she went to. Due to the communicable disease control regulations, she was not sporting a decorative tree branch in her hair.

For females of the Alvu race, not having a branch in their hair was the same as

not wearing underwear. Being branchless was a sign of a complete pervert. Due to this, she had extreme difficulty settling down.

“So then, Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan-san.”

“Heavens! Wh-What is it?!” The voice of the Otherworld Travel Administrator ringing out in the room caused Baba-Nyan to jump into the air.

With a slight tinge of wryness in his voice, the administrator went on to ask, “All procedures have been completed. The only thing left is the choosing of your desired destination. What kind of world is it that you wish to travel to?”

“Well asked!” With the fateful moment finally right before her eyes, Baba-Nyan temporarily forgot her bashfulness and gave voice to the wish that she had been nursing for oh so long. “I wish for a world inhabited by a demon lord most vile, possessed of sufficient power to destroy the stars and attended to by subordinates of might; a demon lord who toys with the hearts of innocents and assaults them on a whim. A world where, in opposition to this, stands a hero with a heart so stalwart as to be unbreakable. That... that is the world that I wish for.”

“We will now initiate the search. Please remain patient as we—oh, the search is completed. We have one hit. It’s quite rare to find a world that fulfills such detailed requests in such a short amount of time.”

“So you *have* found one!”

“Feel free to give me a shout when you are ready to go.”

“Worry not; send me forth with haste. Long have I waited for this day! For this very moment!”

“Then I shall begin. Transmigration in three, two, one.”

“FUHAHAHAHAHA! WAIT FOR ME, DEMON LORD OF THIS OTHER WORLD!”

That day, the previous queen of Alvu Kingdom, Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan (905 years old) disappeared from the world, having transmigrated to another one.

However, she had yet to realize that what the search engine had hit on was not a demon lord, but a lower middle class dude who could wield a bit of telekinesis. Thus she set forth, with every expectation of a magnificent

adventure to defeat a demon lord threatening an entire world, together with a
gallant hero at her side———

Chapter 2: Is an Esper Allowed to Dream of the Fantasy Genre?

After the Super Water Sphere Incident, the population in Tokyo shot up.

Why, you ask? The answer was simple.

The supersized sphere of water that appeared in midair over the Tokyo Bay—the Super Water Sphere—and the mysterious group in black, a secret organization of espers... those two existences had displayed a battle that seemed to be the realization of chuuni delusions everywhere. This lit a fire inside the heart of every occult maniac in the world, leading to havoc of unprecedented scale.

A supernatural monster! Individuals wielding superpowers who stood against it! A spectacular battle with incredible intensity! No CG at all!

If I had not been the person enacting the whole Super Water Sphere incident, I would have been leaping about with excitement as well. Without a doubt, I would have abandoned everything and devoted myself solely to investigating what had happened. Foreign tourists poured into Tokyo en masse, and international flights landing in Haneda Airport were overflowing regardless of the hour. People had to line up to make pre-bookings, even with extra flights scheduled as a stopgap measure.

Just like the boom before the start of hosting the Olympics, the number of tourists on the streets grew and grew, all hotels became completely filled, all the reception facilities were placed under enormous stress, and the police found themselves working to the bone managing traffic and squabbles. Interpreters gathered like bees to honey, and Tokyo screamed happily from the unexpected economic boom.

That aside... and this might seem obvious, but with more people roaming about, the number of places devoid of people would decrease. This was especially true of those investigating the Super Water Sphere incident and the

warehouse area on the coast from where the giant black bird had set off. These people made it a point to wander around similarly abandoned places. They were looking for espers like certain hunters of rare monsters.

The bizarre sight of tattooed men with darkish skin and groups of foreigners (sporting very eye-catching hair colors and hairstyles) with crystal balls and staves in hand roaming around alleyways and sites of demolished factories continued day in and day out. It was a very bewildering situation fitting of the description “unpopular places being popular.” *Sorry, that joke sounded funnier inside my head.*

I wasn't about to sacrifice Shouta-kun or Touka-chan to these hunters, so instead, I purposely let these hunters catch glimpses of World Shadows to give them conversation fodder. Naturally, despite the glimpses, I never let anyone get their hands on conclusive evidence.

For example, they would see one while turning a corner, but it would be gone by the time they got their camera out.

Or if they did manage to snap a picture, it would be blurry, affected by a mysterious fog.

Or even if they managed to successfully take a picture, the camera would inexplicably break down.

In this way, I fanned the ongoing atmosphere of impatience and curiosity. At the same time, I also propagated the rumor that “my friend was attacked and got eaten by one of those black watery monsters.” Then I went and posted online that “those monsters are manifestations of the evil in people's hearts, namely ‘World Shadows,’” as well as “they're actually made of oil and would explode upon contact with fire.” Point is, I was mixing truth and lies in order to muddy up the waters.

The fact that World Shadows were being spotted was true. Obviously, the fact that they were attacking people was false.

However, these facts were circulated around at the same time, which made it seem like both of them were true. Among the 80,000 people who go missing in Japan each year, 2,000 are never found. Perhaps a fraction of those had actually been swallowed up by World Shadows (or perhaps not).

Eventually, the false fact that “World Shadows are attacking people” permeated the public’s consciousness. However, regardless of how hard people searched—and the police especially put in a lot of effort—nobody could present any physical proof (obviously, I wouldn’t allow it), so eventually this was treated as just another urban legend.

This urban legend strategy that Kaburagi-san had come up with involved introducing the rumors from various sources, including hiring trustworthy people (without revealing the detailed truth to them). Naturally, it was a resounding success. This urban legend status went a long way in incurring casualties from World Shadows without actually incurring casualties. If it was generally accepted knowledge that World Shadows had hurt actual people, then killing them would become an act of justice.

Speaking of the World Shadows, they got upgraded after the Super Water Sphere incident. Specifically, they had changed from being squishy-looking figures without a determinate form to being humanoid-looking with a smooth exterior. It was humans who had destroyed the violent existences that had been the Super Water Spheres. Due to that, everyone had subconsciously come to think of humans as being the more powerful being in comparison to these strange-looking monsters. Consequently, the World Shadows that had had indeterminate forms thus far suddenly took on humanoid forms, as that was the figure that everyone subconsciously associated with violence.

.....Or so went the lore-friendly explanation. The truth was that this was our solution to the fights becoming a mere grind. There is no other living creature with a greater variety of fighting styles than humans. There are plenty of ways to fight with them. Therefore, it was much more convenient to have the World Shadows be in humanoid form so as to test out various attack patterns and combat situations. Though of course, depending on the situation, the old version of the World Shadows might still show up every once in a while.

I was slightly afraid that if Shouta-kun and Touka-chan got used to inflicting violence on humanoid beings, then they might lose the inhibition to do the same to real humans. However, they had experienced significant mental growth from the Super Water Sphere incident. I determined that I could trust them to discern between humanoid beings and actual humans. That was how resolute

their hearts had become.

However, unshakable resolution was not going to help pull up their grades. Studying is the only way to acquire knowledge. After having become third years, Shouta-kun and Touka-chan spent every day diligently hitting the books, at times asking Kaburagi-san to explain certain parts that they didn't understand.

Shouta-kun was one thing, but Touka-chan had a really bright head on her shoulders, such that she could usually understand the material just by studying it and didn't need anyone to teach it to her. However, she would at times pretend to not understand something just to get some attention from Kaburagi-san. And although Kaburagi-san saw through that, she would still play along.

Seeing Shouta-kun looking slightly left out by these two who seemed to be on a wavelength of their own, I wordlessly passed him some ero magazines disguised as reference books. Of course, they were ones depicting big boobies. He caught my message of "keep this a secret from the girls, all right?" through eye contact alone.

Take that, Kaburagi-san and Touka-chan. This is what it means to communicate through eye contact alone!

As these slightly silly yet heartwarming days went along, summer break came upon these middle school third years.

Kaburagi-san's efforts to worm her way into the government, police, and mass media by making connections and whatnot had also made rather significant progress. We were in a good position to start thinking about introducing a new member to the organization.



On a certain day, I prepared a World Shadow as a breather for Shouta-kun after he had finished a mock exam. He had been stuck at a desk the entire day while being stared at by an exam supervisor, so an opportunity to get some exercise and move his body a bit was just right for him.

The location was a place that I had already confirmed to be devoid of both people and set-ups like security cameras. Touka-chan had also taken the same mock exam, but for her, copying out sutras at home made for a better breather,

so only Shouta-kun was called into action today.

Inside an abandoned building that had been slated for demolition and thus was covered with a blue tarp, Shouta-kun faced off against two World Shadows in a room of undressed concrete. He fought beautifully with his favorite fighting style of dual wielding -200°C ice katanas, and the World Shadows were eventually cut down one after the other. After he was done with it, he threw the katanas to the ground and stomped them to shards, with the expectation that the scorching summer heat would automatically melt them and effectively erase evidence of the fight. He then cleared away the dried up potted plants and moldy desk and other things that had gotten destroyed during the fight. After all the aftermath cleanup, he looked totally refreshed. Clearly the breather had gone very well. Until the two of them successfully entered high school, I planned to throw World Shadows at them every once in a while to serve as a good way to release stress.

Was it because I was distracted with such thoughts? I had completely failed to notice the little girl peeking on Shouta-kun's battle from the other side of the broken doorway of the abandoned building.

I was extremely astonished. This shouldn't have happened.

I had already confirmed that there was no one anywhere inside the abandoned building. The entrances were also closely guarded to prevent anyone from coming in. I had performed a very thorough check of all the nooks and crannies where anyone could have been hiding.

In spite of all that, why is there a little girl here? Did she teleport in from somewhere? Like hell she did. Then did I overlook her? Now that was truly impossible. No way I would have overlooked her.

I'm pretty sure I didn't.

I didn't, did I?

I don't think I did.

But it looks like I might have.

I might actually have.

.....I'm not so sure anymore.

The little girl shouted incomprehensible words while dashing over to Shouta-kun. Paying no attention to his delinquent-like appearance, with his fiery red hair and silver accessories jangling about, she grabbed his hands without hesitation and swung them furiously. Her white—no, that's closer to silver—long hair was done up in a three—no, four-stranded braid, with a barely withered branch stuck inside her hair like a hair pin. Her appearance was that of a 9-or 10-year-old. She had beautiful deep green eyes, and was wearing a simple, unadorned white outfit. Her facial features had a mysterious beauty to them, like what one would expect to see in a fantasy movie. Why was it that, in spite of her apparent age, she emitted not so much cuteness, but rather elegance and dignity?

Ah, right, probably because of her ears. Indeed, the little girl's ears were very strange. They were pointed, almost as if she were an elf.

"Rea yo au verbra? M'i te hequn fo Alvse, Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan!"

"Uh, what? Umm, *excuse me?* Wait, that's not it, um, *please speak Japanese?*"

The little girl was talking up a storm in a language that I had never heard before. It was definitely not English. Shouta-kun was acting as flustered as a middle schooler approached by a foreigner out of the blue—oh wait, yeah, that was exactly what was going on. But in his bewilderment, he had already helped rule out English.

But still, why is such a girl here in such a place? But hold on, let me elaborate. An elf-like girl was not all that out of place here in Tokyo these days. The day before yesterday, a death god-like super emaciated person (Charles Smith, 32 years old, hailing from Wisconsin, America) had been caught by the police for violating the Swords and Firearms Control Law and Narcotics Control Law while loitering around an alleyway wearing a ragged black robe and holding an actual scythe.

At the time, eccentrics and oddballs from all over the world were gathering in Tokyo, drawn to the supernatural like moths to a flame. If a death god-like person was here, then why not an elf-like girl? That part was fine.

The problem was how she had slipped through my monitoring.

However..... ughh. I was already beginning to doubt my own memory. I may indeed have been getting a bit lax in my location screening as of late. With how small she was, maybe I had overlooked her burrowing in from some narrow place or another.

Just in case, I reached out to her with telekinesis, and confirmed that she did not have a superpower source. That ruled out the possibility of her being a naturally-occurring esper who had used a superpower of her own to sneak in. But if that was so, then the only possibility left was that she had somehow managed to hide herself from my monitoring.

This was terrible. I had clearly let my guard down. If it had been a policeman that I had overlooked, then it would have been a disaster. I tried to console myself that an incomprehensible foreign little girl was much better than the alternative. Even if a little girl said that she saw an ice user fighting against a World Shadow, nobody would believe her anyway.

As I was in the middle of settling my own thoughts, Shouta-kun, while looking thoroughly troubled by how the little girl was excitedly running circles around him and patting him all over, had apparently decided to bring her back to Ama-no-Iwato. Most likely, he thought that it would be a bad idea to bring her to the police now that she had witnessed him in action.

In the past, Shouta-kun had been brought to Ama-no-Iwato and recruited into Amaterasu after witnessing Touka-chan in the middle of a fight. Regardless of the fact that it was a little girl that he was now dealing with, he had probably drawn on that experience as reference and consequently was taking the same measure.

This was very commendable. He had learned from experience. But clearly he had forgotten that when it had happened to him, Touka-chan had also called Kaburagi-san ahead of time.

Bringing her over is fine and all, but give us a call beforehand, dude. He was indeed growing, but still had a ways to go.

While Shouta-kun was making his way over to Ama-no-Iwato pulling the little girl along, I interrupted Kaburagi-san's work with a call. After I explained what

had happened, she laughed and, despite the short notice, told me that she would come over to Ama-no-Iwato to check out the situation. We were dealing with a foreign girl cosplaying as an elf who, judging by her excitement, was a passionate seeker of espers and had successfully slipped through my telekinetic monitoring with some unknown method. She had great talent and passion. As soon as a thorough background check cleared her, then she would have fulfilled all the requirements for joining Amaterasu.

I did have one little concern about this though. Thing was, if this little girl joined us, then the average age of Amaterasu members would be dipping perhaps a bit too low. With 24 (Kaburagi), 25 (me, Sago), 15 (Touka), 15 (Shouta), 10 (Ig), and 9 (my guesstimate of the little girl's age), all of us were young. Amaterasu was steadily turning into a young people's association. *I might be getting a bit ahead of myself, but after this little girl joins us, I should probably recommend a refined, gentlemanly uncle. It would probably lead to another incredible candidate selection battle with Kaburagi-san, but still.*

Along the way, despite not understanding each other, Shouta-kun and the little girl had apparently managed to grasp each other's names. Regardless of the language barrier, conveying one's name was a simple matter of pointing to oneself and repeating one's name, so it wasn't that difficult to achieve.

The little girl, who was apparently a quick learner, quickly took to calling him "Shouta," with great pronunciation too. On the other hand, Shouta-kun was thoroughly perplexed at seeing the little girl point to herself and repeatedly saying "Baba."

Seriously? "Baba"? Could it be that this little girl had picked up weird Japanese somewhere? Is she all right? Who the hell is the asshole who taught her that the Japanese word for "girl" was "baba"? Did they think it was hilarious to have a little girl call herself "old hag"? It's not entirely wrong, but it's way off, goddammit. We still have no idea what your real name is.....

Kaburagi-san got to Ama-no-Iwato just in time, right before Shouta-kun arrived with the little girl in tow. While she pretended to only be there to enjoy a cup of afternoon tea, she threw out a question as if she had no idea what was going on. Ig was on my head, warily checking out Baba-chan.

“Oh my, what a cute little girl. Is something the matter?”

“Sorry, Kaburagi-san. I got seen in the middle of a battle. I didn’t know what to do, so I brought her here.”

“Mm, good call. But it would have been even better if you had called to give prior notice.”

“Ahh, I guess I should have. So then, what are we going to do with this girl?”

“Wos ih siht maown?”

“As you can see, I have no idea what she’s saying.” Shouta-kun patted Baba-chan’s shoulder with a weak look on his face. The girl in question was pulling on the hem of his shirt while looking at Kaburagi-san and once again saying something incomprehensible.

“Leave it to me,” said Kaburagi-san as she put down her tea cup and came over to squat in front of Baba-chan. Making sure to match her eye level, she smiled gently and began speaking to her in different languages. At first, Baba-chan simply looked astonished, but soon after, her ears began twitching (apparently they could) as she listened with full attention. However, never once did she make a “yes, that’s the one!” reaction.

After trying for a while, Kaburagi-san eventually threw up both hands and stood back up. “The language that this girl is speaking is most likely a pidgin or a creole interlanguage.”

“Uh, a what?” returned Shouta-kun while looking as baffled as he had just heard Martian.

In response, Kaburagi-san put one hand on her hip and lifted a finger in a big sister pose while diving into her explanation. “Simply put, it’s a minor hybrid language that you won’t find in a dictionary. For example, say America and China trade with each other. In the port cities where this trading is thriving, a unique dialect that is a combination of English and Chinese would arise. This baby language born between the two is called a pidgin language. Once that pidgin language settles in and becomes the native language of the local people, then it becomes known as a creole language. Pidgin and creole languages together are collectively known as interlanguages.”

“I... see. Now that’s a fact I probably won’t ever need in my life.”

“It’s useful right now, isn’t it? I believe that this child here is speaking a creole language that’s a combination of two or more minor languages. I know how to greet someone in the 800 most well-used languages in the world. The fact that she didn’t react to any of them lends credence to my hypothesis.”

Uwah, as expected of a Tokyo University graduate. Kaburagi-san’s knowledge was incredibly extensive. I, for one, was completely convinced and was nodding internally. In other words, this little girl hailed from a tiny country somewhere far, far away. If she couldn’t speak our language, then it would be a bit troublesome to recruit her into Amaterasu. However, I had every confidence that Kaburagi-san would do something about that somehow (completely passing the buck here).

By then, Ig had approached Baba-chan’s feet, so Baba-chan picked her up and began playing with her. While looking at them with an indescribable look on his face, Shouta-kun offered timidly, “Ahh, umm..... I, uh, think that this girl might be an... elf? I mean see, she has really long ears, right?”

Kaburagi-san and I shared a look, then burst out laughing.

An elf?

An elf, he said!

Wasn’t it great that he still had dreams! But most regrettably, elves didn’t exist in this world.

This shitty reality was indeed overflowing with fraudulent and fake fantasy. There were your scam artists pretending to be espers, braggarts who claimed to know how to use magic, and those who believed themselves to be real demons, just to name a few. Listing them all would take ages.

Both Kaburagi-san and I had experience trying to find the real deal from among that heap of garbage. *This time it’d be the real thing! Please let it be the real thing!* Again and again, we held out hope, only to be betrayed every single time.

To be honest, it wasn’t that I was vehemently against the idea of elves being real. I just did not want to believe too easily only to get hurt again. No matter

how fantasy-like something is, doubt its veracity until conclusive evidence comes out. This is the smart way to survive in this shitty reality.

Baba-chan was indeed elf-like, but everything about her could be explained rationally.

The reason why we couldn't understand her was because she was speaking a very minor language.

The reason why her ears were long was because it was a genetic mutation.

The reason why she could move her ears was because she was just one of those people who could. It wasn't like this was something unheard of.

The reason why her eyes were green was because of irregular pigmentation.

The reason why she had silver-colored hair was because she dyed it.

The reason why she had stuck a branch in her hair was because she was copying something she saw in a picture book or anime.

The reason why she was in that abandoned building was either because she had gotten lost or she had slipped out from her parents' supervision to "have an adventure."

There wasn't a single thing about her that could not be explained with reasoning. In other words, fantasy did not exist here. She was not an elf.

"Fufu, wouldn't it be interesting if she really was an elf?"

"I can tell you're not taking me seriously, Kaburagi-san! If espers and World Shadows and a secret organization can exist, then why can't elves exist too?!"

Yeah it's strange, isn't it? (flat tone)

However, because of the personality that Kaburagi-san and I shared, we still wanted to bet on that tiny sliver of hope.

After getting permission through hand gestures, Kaburagi-san procured a strand of Baba-chan's hair, then left to ask one of her university underclassmen to conduct a DNA analysis on it.

If Baba-chan really was an elf, then we should be getting a result different from that of normal humans. The results would come back a week later. *Let's*

just wait till then without getting our hopes up.

Baba-chan had nothing on her except her clothes and shoes. Those clothes and shoes were also of an unfamiliar design, and there were no logos or marks on them that indicated the brand. With the language barrier in place, we couldn't ask her where her house or her parents were either. When we showed her the phone number input screen on a smartphone and when we pulled up a map for her, both times she simply stared at the screen blankly.

Under the current circumstances, we had no way of delivering her to the parents who were surely desperately searching for her. That was a bit troubling. Even if we did plan on eventually identifying her and recruiting her to Amaterasu, what were we supposed to do with her now?

For starters, now that we knew she couldn't speak Japanese and therefore could not leak information about Shouta-kun's superpower, we thought about leaving her with the police. However, Baba-chan herself proved to be vehemently against this. She talked up an absolute storm toward the policeman in her incomprehensible language, all while clinging to Shouta-kun's arm and firmly refusing to let go. The policeman could do nothing but smile wryly and suggested that, if it were all right with Shouta-kun and his family, Baba-chan could stay in the Takahashi house for a while.

Eventually, the discussion settled down with the agreement that as soon as a missing person's report that seemed to fit Baba-chan's description was filed with the police, then they would go look for her at the Takahashi house. Although she was just a little girl, taking care of one more person was a big matter. However, the Takahashi house turned out to be extremely loose in this regard, and enthusiastically accepted this mysterious-looking elf-eared little girl with silver hair done up in a four-stranded braid with open arms.

Every single step of the process had been reasonable and natural, but the fact that Shouta-kun had so easily picked up a little girl who was now going to live with him in his house—exactly like so many light novel main characters were apt to—made me laugh a bit. His protagonist element was clearly still alive and well. *You never cease to amuse me, young man! Now, if only I had been able to get even a tiny portion of your protagonistic power back when I was a teenager myself.....*

After that, during the week before the DNA results came out, I did everything I could to ascertain Baba-chan's identity and background with my telekinesis. However, to my astonishment, I couldn't find a single clue. Kaburagi-san also hired several private detectives and sent them looking, but in spite of Baba-chan's very conspicuous appearance, apparently there wasn't a single person who had seen her prior to her encounter with Shouta-kun.

It was a complete mystery. She was a little girl wrapped in mystery. Everything was so mysterious that I couldn't help but begin to nurse a faint hope that she really was an elf and that she had appeared due to teleportation magic or something of the sort.

Stop it, stop it, stop it.....! Don't play with my heart like this again, like that time with Mrs. Marrick! If this turns out to be another case of my emotions being played up only to be betrayed with a "Nah, it was just a lie," I am going to flip my shit. I'm totally going to rampage with my telekinesis. So stop being prematurely happy!

Aside from the circumstantial evidence, there were other points that also contributed to fanning my expectations regardless of my will.

The reason why she ate only the vegetables and fruits among the fare offered at the Takahashi dinner table was probably because she was a vegetarian, and the reason why she looked at the TV and radio with such interest was most likely because she came from a developing country where electronics had yet to permeate the populace. However, her overly rational and monstrous learning ability was the one thing that could not be explained.

From the children's picture books that had been sleeping in a corner of the Takahashi family's storage closet, to the pop songs, J-pop, and sutras brought over by Touka-chan—who visited almost everyday to dote on the cute little girl—Baba-chan absorbed everything voraciously, learning the Japanese language at a jaw-dropping pace. If that had been it, then it would have been possible to just write her off as a genius. However, she gradually got to the point where her two eyes were moving separately while reading two different books, and her ears were twitching out of sync in response to the radio and TV and computer blaring out in the background.

To put it mildly, it was creepy. That was not something a human could pull off. Could it be that instead of an elf, she was the reincarnation of Prince Shoutoku? This theory regarding the imperial royal personage who had been so passionate about introducing Buddhism to Japan had Touka-chan up in a tizzy.

And well, with this and that going on, very quickly the week was over, and the DNA results came out.

Everyone gathered at Ama-no-Iwato, respectively nursing cups of coffee, tea, and fruit juice while sitting around a table and chatting aimlessly, waiting for the results.

Today, Kaburagi-san was wearing a thin and fluttery red dress, like the kind worn by dancers in India. Thanks to what was most likely a feat achieved through cosmetics, her skin was tanner than usual, and she gave off a very Arabian vibe. I thought it unfair how she looked so stunning in whatever she wore. I loved it.

Abruptly, Shouta-kun asked, "Speaking of which, can you use magic?"

While dangling legs that did not reach the ground and holding her glass with both hands, Baba-chan replied falteringly, "The... thing... for magic... in this world... lacking. Magic... cannot."

"Hmm..... so you mean to say that because this world does not have magical power, you can't use magic here?"

"Yes!"

Kaburagi-san posed her question while drawing a cute chibi illustration in the white page at the back of a magazine with a ballpoint pen, to which Baba-chan nodded satisfactorily in response.

Hah, you silly baba! Don't think you can pull one over me! "I know some really incredible magic, but I just can't use it cus I'm out of magical power" is a line that I have heard five quadrillion times already. You've got to come up with a better excuse! I know what you're all about! Oh right, there isn't magical power huh! Oh right, you actually really do know some incredible spells huh! Oh sure! There's no helping it, I suppose! If only there was magical power, am I right?! Let's not probe too deeply into this. Everyone goes through that phase in

their life. What a poor girl, catching the chuuni illness at such a tender age.

The current fellow chuuni patient Shouta-kun was nodding in understanding, but everything else he managed after that was random gibberish.

Then abruptly, Kaburagi-san's smartphone rang, breaking this awkward atmosphere. The results were finally out.

It's fine. I've already prepared the cake for the consolation party.

Kaburagi-san read over the text displayed on her screen five or six times, then said in a quivering voice, "The DNA analysis results came out. The percentage match between Baba-chan's DNA and human DNA..... is 0%."

Everyone present was at a loss for words.

Z-Zero? Not 100%, not even 10%, but ZERO? In spite of the fact that even chimpanzees have a 90% DNA match? Zero? So, what, then? Does that mean Baba-chan is a sea cucumber or something? Wait, no, even sea cucumbers aren't 0%.

Just in case, I finally tried something that I had thought to hold off on until Baba-chan's identity was clarified: I attempted to transplant a telekimuscle onto her. The result was a complete failure. I had felt more feedback trying to transplant onto a boulder. That was how thoroughly it failed.

There was no way. This feeling was impossible when transplanting onto a human. In that case. If so..... I found it extremely hard to believe, but all the clues were pointing toward the same fact.

Baba-chan..... no, this baba.....

She really wasn't human!!

Chapter 3: Police! Freeze! Put Your Hands Above Your Heads!

Upon the revelation that Baba was truly not human, Shouta-kun and Touka-chan merely had “Ahh, as we thought” looks on their faces. In contrast, Kaburagi-san and I both fell into a bit of a panic.

Was this not a development where someone actually extraordinary had found us as a result of us pretending to be extraordinary with our play-acting? This was so abrupt that it didn’t feel real. We were filled with unease and anticipation, as if we were the ones who had accidentally wandered into another world.

The fact that her DNA was a 0% match with that of humans meant that she was almost certainly not a lifeform found on this planet. And yet, despite not being an earthly lifeform, her appearance was extremely similar to that of humans, and she could communicate with humans. In other words, Baba’s real identity was that of a highly intelligent non-earthly being who had managed to mingle into human society. She was an alien.

Based on all her previous comments about magic, perhaps she was an otherworlder. Well, the definition of “alien” is “beings from another world that is not Earth,” so technically aliens are also otherworlders. We couldn’t even tell if she was taking on a human appearance or if this was how she naturally looked.

Honestly speaking, this was terrifying. We knew far too little about her. She was acting in a friendly manner for now, but the instant we pissed her off, she might very well destroy Earth with a cosmic laser or a magical beam or some other weapon of mass destruction. A planet (?) that had the technology to send her here could easily make one or two such superweapons. *Would I be able to put up enough of a fight with telekinesis? If it’s destroying planets, then I can do that too, so I’d like to think that I would be able to do something at least.....*

On the other hand, we were also extremely excited about the fact that we

had apparently come in contact with someone from a completely different civilization. The only time we had ever seen otherworlders or aliens was in movies or manga. There was no counting how many times we had dreamed of going to space or another world and doing something incredible.

The way I saw it, with how vast and wide space was, perhaps there really was a chance of aliens existing somewhere out there. However, I had come to terms with the fact that I probably wouldn't have the opportunity to meet any during my lifetime, thanks to the shittiness of reality. And then out of the blue, this happened. How could I not become elated?

Just as the ballooning unease and anticipation within me threatened to blow off my sour face mask and send it flying to the edge of tomorrow, Kaburagi-san, having managed to recover first, pulled me behind the counter.

While shooting glances at the students excitedly talking to Baba, who looked puzzled at all the surprised reactions, Kaburagi-san whispered in my ear, "Sago-san, let's calm down for a moment first. It's still not certain that Baba-chan..... no, Baba-san, is a magical girl."

"What? But the DNA analysis—"

"We used a strand of Baba-san's hair for the analysis, right? If that silver hair of hers is a synthetically created wig, then it would make sense that it would have a 0% match with human DNA. Rather than 'Baba-san is not human,' 'it was a mistaken analysis' is much more believable."

"Now that you mention it....." My excitement deflated almost immediately. It was exactly as she said.

When seeing a self-proclaimed magician get into a box and then disappear, one wouldn't think "he really used magic," but rather "he used some gimmick." Upon encountering something seemingly unscientific, one should not immediately jump to accepting it as something fantastical without first thoroughly eliminating all possibilities of it being a gimmick, a trick, or a misunderstanding. A real esper allowing themselves to be fooled by a mere sleight of hand artist would be a laughingstock.

"Let's redo the analysis with a more certain method. If we get a 0% match again, only then will we accept her as a real magical girl." Kaburagi-san had put

quite the emphasis on “magical girl.” It was true that Baba had said something about magic. Considering how obsessed Kaburagi-san was with magical girls, it wasn’t all too hard to imagine how priceless an existence Baba would become in Kaburagi-san’s eyes were she to prove to be a real one in the flesh. Baba did indeed say something about magic, so in the eyes of Kaburagi-san, who was obsessed with magical girls, if Baba proved to be a real one, it would make her a priceless existence in Kaburagi-san’s eyes.

I too greatly welcomed a fantasy being who wasn’t an esper. If I could have my way, then we would definitely be having superpower vs. magic fights.

In the meantime, we agreed that we needed to do a second test, so Kaburagi-san shifted into action without further ado. After getting permission from Baba, she stuck a cotton swab into her mouth to get a sample of her saliva and cheek cells, and then put the swab away in a small tube. She said that she would immediately bring it to the DNA analysis lab at Tokyo University for testing, so I decided to accompany her.

While making our way to the closest station with quick steps, I asked, “Do you think she’s the real thing, Kaburagi-san?”

“The possibility is about..... 60%, I’d say.”

“Sixty?!” That’s a really high number, considering how doubtful you seemed!

“This is far too elaborate to be a mere act meant to deceive us. However, aren’t we also carrying out similarly ‘far too elaborate’ acts? We can’t entirely rule out the possibility of there being another organization that’s doing the same thing we’re doing.”

“Ahh, I see. But to be honest, even if this is all just an act, I still think that would be interesting in its own way.” If everything was a mere lie aimed at deceiving us, well, I would indeed be a bit pissed off. However, the effort put into going this far and making such an absurd premise seem so believable, now that deserved some respect. I was sure I could get along very well with this mastermind, if there was one.

Of course, the most interesting scenario was still Baba proving to be an otherworlder. But point was, no matter which way the coin landed, it’d still be fun.

As a result of the Super Water Sphere Incident, various eccentrics and oddballs became interested in Tokyo and flocked here. If this gathering was what caused the probability of this encounter with Baba to go up, then in a way, this was not coincidence, but inevitability. *Good job, me, for starting up this secret organization.*

As we were waiting for the crosswalk light at the intersection in front of the station to change, our hearts were agitated and restless at the possibilities that seemed to be taking shape before our eyes. But suddenly, we were addressed from behind by a man in a suit.

“Excuse me. I’m with the police. May I have a bit of your time?” He turned out to be a gangly man with a small build. His slightly long black hair was scraggly and disheveled which, when combined with his bucktooth and unshaven moustache, gave him the look of a crafty mouse. He appeared to be in his early thirties.

The instant Detective Mouse showed us his police ID while talking to us, I almost let out a weird cry. *Oh hell, this is a police interrogation! What should I do?!* I had heard the rumor that police interrogations were getting increasingly frequent in Tokyo as of late, but never did I imagine it’d happen to me.

After the Super Water Sphere Incident, Tokyo had become the model city for eccentrics and oddballs. Now, eccentrics and oddballs themselves were just entertaining and harmless. However, the problem was that there were also perverts and criminals who had hidden themselves among their numbers. In addition to that, there were the problems caused by the influx of foreign tourists, as well as the problems of Japanese people trying to scam those foreign tourists, so apparently the police had taken to proactively patrolling the city streets.

I wanted to simply say, “thank you for your service,” but I was the very culprit responsible for the Super Water Sphere Incident that had caused the police to become as badly overworked as they currently were. The underground room beneath Ama-no-Iwato was obviously unreported and thus illegal, and though mainly meant as a part of the interior design, I was also in illegal possession of firearms. In addition to all that, I was regularly inciting middle schoolers to acts of violence in the form of the World Shadow battles.

I had way too much to be guilty about that I found it really hard to meet his eyes. Although it was extremely unlikely to be true, I felt like I was being cornered because all the crimes that I had committed had been completely exposed. I began sweating profusely. *Th-Th-Th-This is just because it's summer!*

Somehow having sensed that it was taking all I had to maintain my sour face, Kaburagi-san casually stepped in between me and Detective Mouse. "Thank you for your service, detective. Has there been an incident?"

"Ah, it's not quite an incident, really. By the way ma'am, you speak really good Japanese."

"That's because I'm Japanese."

"Ja-pan... ese.....?" With a doubtful expression on his face, Detective Mouse looked at Kaburagi-san's chest, face, waist, chest, thighs, and back to chest.

Aren't you looking at her chest too much? Though admittedly, that was the most non-Japanese-seeming part of her.

Today, Kaburagi-san was wearing the costume of an Arabian dancer, and she had also tanned her skin. I was already a bit numbed to Kaburagi-san's amazing costume-of-the-day displays, but perhaps this was indeed an appearance that would draw the eye of the police.

Judging by the way he commented on her Japanese, had he had misunderstood the situation? Did he think that I was kidnapping a pretty Arabian or Indian girl? I guess the sight of a drop-dead foreign beauty walking beside a dull-looking dude might indeed have come across as a bit suspicious. Maybe it was my presence that aroused suspicion in the first place.

"May I ask about this rather unique outfit that you are wearing?"

"I made this raqs sharqi outfit myself. It's a hobby of mine."

"A... hobby, you say. Oh I see, are you perhaps taking lessons at a dance studio?"

"No, this is just my casual wear. I like dressing myself up. See, I can even do *this* in this outfit." Kaburagi-san reached out with a hand to wave her skirt while twirling a few times, before finally coming to a stop with her head slightly tilted

and finishing with a wink. This performance that looked like a scene straight out of a movie made Detective Mouse start breathing heavily, and many passersby had also stopped, with some even starting to film with their smartphones.

You sure about this, Kaburagi-san? You're standing out like crazy, you sure you wanna do this? Admittedly, I am thankful that you've completely diverted the detective's attention away from me, but are you really sure about this?

The ogling Detective Mouse was no longer in any mood for an interrogation. "Well I'll be. That was absolutely beautiful. Heh heh heh."

"Heh heh heh"?! Is this detective seriously rubbing his hands together while laughing like "heh heh heh"?! That sure took me by surprise. To think that there really are people who laugh like that. This is way too hilarious. I think I'm starting to like him.

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry, but we actually have business to attend to, so we should probably get going....." Kaburagi-san gave him a bow and turned toward the crosswalk, but Detective Mouse cut her off with a vulgar, slimy expression on his face.

"Ah, I hope you don't mind, but I was just wondering if I could have just a little bit more of your time. Tokyo is getting a bit dangerous as of late, you see, and it is also part of our duties to warn the citizens. Ladies like yourself are especially prone to being targeted, you see, so um, we are doing a sale of crime prevention gadgets, and there's also information that you should know. So how about we find a place nearby where we can sit down and have a nice chat..... ouch!"

I had slapped away the hand that Detective Mouse was trying to reach around Kaburagi-san's waist with. *You sure have some guts trying to pick up girls while on duty, eh, officer? Though you shouldn't do it when you aren't on duty either. Talk about mixing up official business with personal affairs. I can't imagine anyone liking such a sleazebag.*

"What do you think you're doing? Don't be obstructing a policeman carrying out his duties. Shoo shoo!"

"Come again?" I was about to explode. *Calm down calm down calm down don't use telekinesis don't use telekinesis don't use telekinesis this detective is*

just exceptionally sleazy most police are diligently doing their job calm down don't make this a big deal don't use telekinesis he's a policeman if you do something to a policeman you will draw attention from the entire police force don't do it people are watching—

“Ah, I’m calling the police.”

“Eh?”

Eh?

“1, 1, 0..... yes, is this the police? Please help me, there’s a man pretending to be a police officer trying to force me to go somewhere with him. My location is —” said Kaburagi-san in a slightly loud and yet scared-sounding tone while pulling a weak and troubled face that would elicit anyone who saw it to rush to her aid.

The gathered crowd began to buzz while looking at Detective Mouse with eyes of censure. My head could not keep up with the atmosphere that had changed so abruptly. *Wh-What’s going on?*

“Eh? Ah, no, in short, what I wanted to say was just, be careful and watch out for yourself, a-a-and anyways I’ve got work to do so please excuse me!”

Kaburagi-san stuck out her tongue toward the back of the escaping detective, then brought her smartphone—which was still on the home screen—away from her ear and back into her bag. “Well then, shall we get going? Do you remember how many stations we are from Tokyo University?”

I could only follow behind her with my mouth half open, thoroughly impressed as she began walking off like nothing had happened. *Holy crap. What just..... like, what? That detective probably won't be able to show his face around this area ever again, right?* Because the detective was in the way, she had lured him in with her charm, gathered the crowd, provoked him to make a move, reported him, then sent him packing. On top of having been thoroughly humiliated, he wouldn’t be able to say a thing about this to his colleagues. The entire process had gone so smoothly that it was scary.

I was really glad that she was on my side. But still—

“That... may have earned us some ill will.”

“A bit, yes. But if I had left it to you, you would have done something with telekinesis, right? Then the situation would have ended far worse than it did.”

Oh, was it me who had dug my own grave? Even though things could have been settled in a more peaceful way, due to me acting weird in front of a policeman and being on the verge of lashing out and generally being emotionally unstable, things had ended up in a bit of a commotion.

“Sorry.....”

“Don’t worry about it. I was glad that you got angry on my behalf. In the first place, getting questioned by the police just for wearing what I like is just plain wrong. The police have been getting a bit more forceful than they were before,” sighed Kaburagi-san gravely.

I was in total agreement. Even before I met her, Kaburagi-san had been walking all around Tokyo in eye-catching outfits for years. It was to the point where she was actually a bit of a famous person on social media. The police in her neighborhood already knew her as the “eccentric pretty lady,” and therefore would not give her any unnecessary trouble.

However, apparently there was an increase in the number of personnel and some deployment shifting due to the Super Water Sphere Incident, which meant there were police officers newly assigned to Adachi City who did not know about Kaburagi-san. As a result, she was getting stopped every once in a while nowadays.

Speaking of troubling affairs, in addition to the police interrogations, there was also the matter of spies from foreign countries infiltrating the country under the guise of being tourists.

Using the commotion from the Super Water Sphere Incident as a foothold, Kaburagi-san had managed to extend her influence into the Japanese government, police force, and mass media to a certain degree, building certain connections along the way.

Due to that, newly drafted laws aimed at controlling and cracking down on espers seemed to be getting delayed for unknown reasons.

Expert councils gathered to help pass judgment on certain individuals wanted

for questioning seemed to have more naysayers than might be expected.

There were even a few TV stations that seemed to be more passionate about advocating for us espers than might be expected.

However, no organization is a singular monolith, and thus it was impossible to hold everything down. Kaburagi-san was incredibly able. However, she was but a single human, and she had her limits. Controlling all of Japan from the shadows was beyond her means.

Now, if our best efforts directed toward the relevant bodies belonging to our own country were still insufficient to give us full control, naturally it stood to reason, unfortunate though it was, that we only had a vague, general grasp of the forces from overseas. If we focused too much on the Japanese police, then we were at risk of getting stabbed in the back from these foreign agents. This was especially true of the CIA. As could be expected from a superpower such as the US, dodging them took quite the effort on our part.

The silver lining in the situation was that in the eyes of the law, the clash between the 50 m Super Water Sphere and espers was technically just a large-scale water fight, so the chances of being pursued as criminals was low. But in light of how the government couldn't very well leave the whole incident alone "just because it wasn't a crime," that silver lining was very thin indeed.

Immediately after the Super Water Sphere Incident, I had thoroughly taken care of all intelligence gathering efforts regarding espers, be they Japanese or otherwise. However, it seemed that it was about time for me to resume eavesdropping on them all again.

Who else thinks it ironic that we have to fight against the police in order to maintain an organization that fights against the shadows of the world?

Chapter 4: Mechanic Granny

Three days after we submitted the second sample for DNA analysis, the results came out. The match percentage was, once again, 0%. This time, we were sure that it was not a misunderstanding. Neither was there any room for duplicity.

Kaburagi-san acknowledged Baba as a non-earthly supernatural existence completely unrelated to superpowers.

My head had also cooled down during the three days of waiting for the DNA results, to the point where I could sit Baba down again to ask about her circumstances more properly. Though it had only been three days, her Japanese proficiency had shot up yet again, such that I managed to gather the following information from her.

- 1) She was a former queen who had come here from another world, one where magic really did exist.
- 2) She was 905 years old.
- 3) Travel between worlds was a one-way ticket, and Earth was now completely isolated from all other worlds.
- 4) It was absolutely impossible to use magic here on Earth.
- 5) Her world was so peaceful that she had been about to die in the mental sense, so she had come to help kill the evil demon lord in our world.
- 6) She was thoroughly convinced that Shouta-kun was the hero fated to eventually defeat the demon lord.
- 7) She would be making the weapon that could kill the demon lord and she would bestow that to the hero.

The entire narrative was very fantastical, but with the undeniable evidence of the DNA analysis in front of my eyes, I had no choice but to believe it all. So Baba really was an otherworlder.

Shouta-kun rejoiced at being named as the hero. Touka-chan rejoiced at the Buddhist concept of the three thousand worlds being proven. I... well, before rejoicing, I felt so regretful that I wanted to die.

This world, Earth, was so tediously realistic and ordinary, but superpowers really did exist. If superpowers could exist, then the fact that there were other worlds, well, that wouldn't be all that strange. However, I had never expected to actually see proof of it appear in front of my own two eyes.

Baba had come too late. If only she had come five years earlier, my university student self would have been able to sincerely rejoice at the existence of a real-life elf loli baba. But unfortunately, she had come now, after I had already fully given up on such dreams. *Dammit! Even I wanted to be acknowledged as a hero by an elf! I wanted to get to fight a demon lord! Why wasn't it me?! Why now after all this time, after I had been beat down by reality and had already succumbed to it?!*

However, I realized that I was still better off than Kaburagi-san, who was laid up from the shock of her dream of becoming a magical girl being thoroughly denied as Baba, an individual who came from another world that actually had magic, confirmed that it was impossible to use magic in our world. Putting it another way, a purely fantastical being had just completely and thoroughly pulverized her fantastical dreams. Reality really was shit.

What made things worse was that our reality was harsh even on otherworlders. The demon lord of our world supposedly “possess[ed] sufficient power to destroy the stars and [was] attended to by subordinates of might,” and who went around “toy[ing] with the hearts of innocents and assault[ing] them on a whim.” Whichever way you look at it, that was a description of me, wasn't it? And the “one with a heart so stalwart as to be unbreakable” who supposedly stands “in opposition” was, going by the circumstances, very likely Shouta-kun.

Spurred by her desperate yearning to be a part of a serious conflict between a demon lord and a hero, Baba had discarded her status, discarded her homeland, and resolved to travel to another world with the knowledge that she could never return. And yet, the world that she arrived at was one in which the “demon lord” was carefreely setting up scenarios for adolescent kids.

This was not something on the level that could be resolved with a simple apology. Although this was through no fault of ours, we had completely botched it. We had effectively stomped all over Baba's resolve toward a once-in-a-lifetime great gamble.

What was there to be done?

It was far too late for me to rejoice.

Kaburagi-san was laid up from her dream being crushed.

Baba had completely struck out, hoping to defeat a demon lord and yet coming to a world without a demon lord.

Even though the extraordinary that I had prayed for unceasingly had finally showed up, it made none of the involved parties happy at all. (Although admittedly the two middle schoolers were totally pumped.) Honestly speaking, I was at a loss for how to handle this situation. Baba apparently thought that the demon lord was controlling the shadows of the world from a hidden place, cruelly spreading suffering to people everywhere. She was only half-correct in a weirdly distorted way. I felt very bad for her, especially seeing how excitedly she was engaging the students in a serious discussion about how to kill this "demon lord," but this was something that I had to stop at any cost. If left alone, my life might be at risk.

This was the kind of situation where I'd normally turn to Kaburagi-san for advice without missing a beat, but the mental anguish that Magical Girl Duchess was suffering from was just far too great. Upon seeing her struggling to sit up in bed, barely managing a weak smile on a haggard face while saying, "Please give me a week. I'll be back to normal by then," there was nothing I could say in response.

Up till now, she had been thoroughly enjoying having a superpower, but apparently her yearning toward chanting cutesy spells and swinging a magical stick around was still very strong. Now that this yearning of hers had been pounded into ash by none other than the very embodiment of fantasy, Kaburagi-san needed to recuperate. Let alone a week, I was fully in support of her resting for two weeks or even a month, however long it would take for her wounded heart to heal.

During that time, I had to do something about the Baba problem.

For starters, I went to the police to have them take down the missing persons report for Baba, then sat down to have a deep thought about what to do. Although this baba who was learning the Japanese language and culture at an aggressive rate could not use magic, the technologies and knowledge that she had accumulated over her years were still alive and well. She had said that she intended to first create a weapon capable of killing a demon lord, and then give it to the person whom she had acknowledged as the hero, Shouta-kun. After that, she would take on the role of helping to maintain the weapon and being a companion on the journey to seek out and destroy the demon lord.

Before the discussion got any further out of hand, I brought Baba to one of the discussion rooms in the secret base underneath Ama-no-Iwato for a one-on-one interview. With a table in between us, we settled into sofas facing each other.

It was pretty much already set in stone that Baba would be joining Amaterasu. The only question was whether she would be joining the side arranging the dancing or the side being made to dance. Judging from everything she had told us so far, she probably wanted to be on the dancing side. I could understand those feelings very well, and I also wanted to let her dance as much as she wanted. However, depending on the situation, she might dance out of control and end up killing me in the process. Exactly what was it that she could do, and what was she planning? I needed more information to make a call.

After passing through the hidden door, Baba's excitement was very clear to see, based on how furiously her ears were twitching and how much she was looking all around. *Does her world not have something like this? Ah, they probably don't. It's because they don't that she went to the trouble of coming to Earth, after all. A fantasy world devoid of the fantastical sounds like the saddest thing ever.*

Maintaining my reticent character while holding an interview would be super hard, so I decided to just talk normally. This baba was a smart baba. If I told her not to, then she probably wouldn't expose me as "a guy who's quiet only to act out a character" to the students.

“Kaburagi-san is laid up in bed, so I’ll be conducting the interview instead. Please answer what I ask you.”

“.....Very surprised. I thought you don’t speak. How you speak?”

“I can speak when I need to. But I’d appreciate it very much if you didn’t tell the kids.”

Baba nodded obediently without pressing any further. I liked an understanding baba.

Without further ado, I dove into my questions. “What makes you think in the first place that there is a demon lord controlling the World Shadows behind the scenes? How can you be sure that this demon lord exists?”

“Demon lord exists. The world search engine found him, so he exists. For sure. Reason why I think he is... behind the scenes, because of... intuition. Power of a demon lord is different in different world. But controlling subordinates to get stronger is very common.”

“I see.” In other words, she was probably mistakenly thinking something along the lines of a demon lord’s existence causing demonic beasts to become more belligerent or a demon lord who continuously gives birth to demonic beasts. It could be said that she wasn’t completely off the mark, I suppose. In actual fact, every single World Shadow was something that I made and controlled wholeheartedly. Each and every one of them were my proud creations, packed with the warmth distinctive of all hand-crafted creations.

“What about that weapon for defeating the demon lord? Is it a magical sword?”

“I cannot use magic. I’ll be making a...machine?...sword.”

“A mechanical sword, you mean?” *Oi*. Isn’t that science fiction? It’s true that a mechanical sword wouldn’t need magic, but isn’t the whole fantasy premise falling apart? Should I be relieved that at least she’s not talking about guns or missiles?

“How to make the mechanical sword... to kill a demon lord... passed down through the Alvu royal family. The Alvu have very useful hands.” Baba proudly wriggled her fingers for me to see. Her wrist could smoothly rotate 360 degrees,

and all five fingers could bend all the way back to lie flat against the back of her hand.

That's hella freaky! This was far beyond what was achievable through training alone. Even though she looked like a human, she really wasn't human after all. No wonder the DNA analysis didn't match at all.

"What material would you be using to make the sword? Don't say mithril or orichalcum, we don't have that here in this world." A sword made of exotic materials that didn't exist on Earth sounded terribly exciting, but the problem lay in the "didn't exist on Earth" part. It was doubtful whether this former queen who was also apparently a mechanic could fully utilize her knowledge and techniques here on our world.

No matter how skillful a katana swordsmith was, there'd be nothing they could do if there was no iron. In the same way, would Earth have the same materials that existed in "Green Ball," the world that Baba had come from?

Clearly and simply, Baba replied, "There is a material that exists in all worlds. I will use that."

"All of the worlds, you say!" I had unconsciously leaned forward. *You sure know how to grab my attention! So basically there's a certain material that exists in every single world? Is that really true?* This sounded like something that would be of extreme interest to a physicist. I could bet that Kaburagi-san had also touched on this somewhere in her collection of make-believe theses.

"What is this material? Gold? Water?"

"Lunpamti. Umm, what is the name here. Do you have a book of... simplest materials... of this world?"

"The simplest materials.....? Ohh, are you talking about the chemical elements?" I looked up "chemical elements list" on my smartphone, then offered it to her.

After scrolling a few times, she pointed at a certain image. "This!"

"Platinum, huh." Platinum was a chemical element with the symbol "Pt" and the atomic number 78. It was a precious metal similar in appearance to silver, often used as catalyst and in accessories. This high grade material had a market

price of around 3,300 yen (USD \$31) per gram. A katana (4.5 kg or 9.9 lbs) made entirely out of platinum would, calculating roughly, be worth 15,000,000 yen (USD 140,400). That was quite the hefty price tag. Boy was I glad we spent all that effort gathering money. Boy was I glad we had set up that rare metal extraction cooperation with Kaneyama Tech. Thanks to that, we had both money and materials in abundance.

But was it even possible to make a sword out of platinum in the first place? If I remembered correctly, it was so low on the Mohs scale of hardness that, without being alloyed with other metals, it couldn't even be made into a ring, let alone mechanical parts. I had never heard of any machine being made out of platinum. It sounded like it'd be super weak.

Possibly having detected the doubt on my face, Baba elaborated, "With Shouta's blood... to burn... to make big power."

"What? Why would you need that? Don't tell me it's because he has the bloodline of a hero...?" I was pretty sure that his lineage was that of a run-of-the-mill commoner though. He did not have an ancestor who was a hero or an otherworlder or any other equally interesting background.

.....He doesn't, right?

"Platinum is a material that gets along well with the special powers of each world."

"In other words?"

"If it's Touka's blood, then the power of fire. Shouta's blood, then the power of ice. Ig's blood, then the power to make pain fly away."

So that's the way it works, huh. I caught the gist of what she was trying to say. This world may not have magic, but it sure had superpowers. In a world with magic, platinum would be compatible to magic; in a world with superpowers, it would then be compatible with superpowers. I shuddered to imagine what would happen if she used *my* blood. A single swing from the platinum mechanical sword, when powered by my blood, might even destroy the planet itself. Might as well forget about destroying the demon lord at that point.

But in contrast, if it was just Shouta-kun's blood, then it seemed like it

wouldn't be such a big deal after all.

"Also, when the sword cut the World Shadows, the demon lord who controls them should get hurt... too."

"Hah?..... Why?"

"They are tied together. Like how after bumping the pinky toe, ouch! Hurts a lot. But maybe not enough to defeat the demon lord."

Allow me to take back what I just said. This is a big deal after all. Thanks to having ripped my telekimuscle so much, I had gained a certain degree of pain tolerance. However, there was no predicting how painful it would be getting cut by this platinum sword of hers. It was the same as how someone used to the pain of being punched would still be weak against the pain of being stabbed.

A platinum sword that could damage me through my telekinetic barrier was a very big deal indeed.

According to Baba's plan, nothing would begin without first making the sword. The materials and machinery needed could probably be gathered at Amaterasu's friendly neighborhood metalworking company, Kaneyama Tech. Everything could start moving as soon as the GO sign was given.

The issues were firstly, whether it was all right to go on ahead without waiting for Kaburagi-san to recover from her heartbreak, and secondly, the possibility that this might lead to me feeling pain, and possibly even dying from this.

After I concluded the interview, I mulled over it for a day, then gave the GO sign after all. I wanted to surprise Kaburagi-san with this "bikkuri dokkiri mecha" as soon as she revived herself. But more importantly, it sounded like it would definitely turn out interesting. A mecha powered by the blood of an esper? I challenge you to find me a guy who wouldn't get fired up hearing about this.

Transformation belt! *Hen~shin!* Combine! Right before my eyes was the opportunity to realize a fragment of a dream dreamt by boys everywhere. Depending on how it turned out, it might even be possible to make something like a magical stick for Kaburagi-san.

If it actually seemed like a weapon that could really kill me was being made,

then I could just stop production immediately.

And therefore, I brought Baba to Kaneyama Tech and had the staff take her through a tour of all the equipment and machinery that they had. As it turned out, the technological level and systems between Baba's world and ours was significantly different, so it was impossible to start making a platinum sword immediately. She would have to build several prototypes first.

This was the start of our joint development of the PSI drive (temporary name) together with Kaneyama Tech.

Please succeed! It's definitely going to turn out interesting!

But it might also be alright to fail just a little bit! After all, I may have pain tolerance, but I still feel pain!

Chapter 5: If Only These Happy Days Could Go on Forever

This might sound quite obvious, but even if the world was on the brink of collapse, humans would still get hungry, would still feel nature's calls, and would still have earwax build up inside their ears. Regardless of how much the world changes, there were things that wouldn't really change all that much.

Although Baba suddenly crashed into our secret organization Amaterasu and caused great waves beyond what any of us could have had expected, Shouta-kun and Touka-chan still had to do their summer homework. With their high school entrance exams still looming on the horizon, it seemed like they had even more homework than the previous year. However, they were doing a pretty good job balancing their studies with breaks.

In return for having received an expensive brand of sunscreen from Kaburagisan, Touka-chan visited her during Obon Festival, bringing with her a selection of her most highly recommended incense sticks. In contrast, Shouta-kun joined some friends in sneaking into their school's home ec classroom at night to have a secret barbeque. Naturally, the fire alarm went off, and they got severely scolded by their homeroom teachers. Thankfully, the teachers settled the matter quietly. Worst case, the police could have gotten involved, which would have affected their chances of getting into the high schools of their choice.

As an adult, I probably should have also scolded him for it. But honestly speaking, I was more impressed at Shouta-kun's derring-do and ability to take action. I regretted not having taken fuller advantage of my own time as a student.

As a freeloader at the Takahashi household, Baba also got completely swept up in the barbeque incident. Within the family, only Shouta-kun knew her true identity, while the others simply thought of her as a foreign little girl who'd gotten lost.

Technically, she was indeed a foreigner, even though what she had crossed

was not a national border but the dimensional border between worlds. Also, it seemed like she might indeed be lost in a “what should I do with my life” kind of way. So I suppose they weren’t entirely wrong. But with that said, the person in question seemed to be having a ton of fun.

The Takahashi household actually had two exam students this year. Shouta-kun’s older brother of 3 years, who was studying for university exams, was getting a bit high strung. Whenever someone made a loud noise inside the house, although he wouldn’t say anything, he would still get visibly annoyed. To get out of his hair, Baba tried to stay outside as often as possible, sometimes dropping by Kaneyama Tech to chat with the technicians about the development of the PSI drive, and sometimes accompanying Shouta-kun as he attended the “Fire Prevention Course for Children” at the nearby fire station.

Today, too, Shouta-kun had found himself half-dead from his furious struggle against quadratic equations, and thus decided to visit the arcade as a breather. Baba seemed extremely interested and therefore tagged along. I also got called, and because I didn’t have anything else to do, decided to join in as well.

When I arrived in front of the arcade Hobby Station Adachi, where we had agreed to meet up, I found the two of them already there, waiting for me.

Shouta-kun was wearing pre-ripped jeans and a T-shirt which, aside from the picture of a fire extinguisher on the front, was so red it hurt my eyes. In addition, he had both a refillable candle lighter and a normal lighter dangling at his waist, and there was a pair of sunglasses tucked in the front of his shirt. His crimson pupils were most definitely because he had put in color contacts. No matter which angle you looked at him, he was the very picture of a delinquent.

In contrast, Baba was wearing a demure white one-piece dress. When combined together with her mystical-looking deep green eyes and her silver hair in its four-stranded braid glittering under the light of the sun, she seemed like someone removed from this world, like a character from a game. She was a stunningly beautiful little girl.

However, what was most eye-drawing was not her facial features or her hair, but her headgear. It was like a mega-sized laurel crown, to the point where it was practically an entire forest on her head. Indeed, it was way past the level of

being mere greenery and worthy of being called a grove. Every single person who passed by did double takes and stared hard at her. Even though Shouta-kun's appearance was quite flashy too, it seemed to pale in comparison to hers.



Aren't you guys laying it on a bit too thick with your respective characters? I think I might be getting heartburn from this sight. So what's this? Was I supposed to have flown through the sky with telekinesis and then made my appearance by literally dropping in with a superhero landing? Well I'm sorry for being such a normal-looking older dude!

"Oh, hey, Master! We're over here!"

"Sago, good afternoon."

"Mm."

After joining up with the two who were waving their hands, we entered the arcade together. Inside, the air conditioner was on full blast, and the feeling of my skin cooling down after having gotten sweaty from walking under the blazing sun felt so good. *Their electricity bill is probably really expensive, isn't it.*

"Master, do you come to arcades often?"

"No."

"Oh well, that's what I thought."

".....Your hair...?"

"I set it myself!"

Unable to hold myself back any longer, I ended up asking Baba about her hair. She replied to me while flashing the peace sign, with her chest held high. *But that's not what I was asking...!*

"Apparently this world's gyaru fashion is really similar to the fashion back on Baba's home world," explained Shouta-kun in her place, in a slightly wry tone of voice.

For someone of her age, this baba is totally enjoying herself to the fullest! You sure are having fun living in another world, oi! But go on and have more fun!

As far as arcades went, Hobby Station Adachi was of medium size, which meant that it had all the most popular attractions that people would expect in an arcade, such as purikura photo booths, rhythm games, whack-a-mole, the one where you try to push tokens off the edge, air hockey, boxing machines,

gachapon toy vending machines, zombie shooters, and racing games.

It was already plenty noisy with the music being blared over the in-store speakers and the music coming from every single game machine, but added to that cacophony was also the sounds of people screaming in joy and disappointment. While tightly clinging to Shouta-kun's arm, Baba looked around curiously as her ears flapped to and fro.

As for Shouta-kun himself, he was making a beeline for the coin exchange machine, even with Baba clinging so tightly. Without hesitation, he fed in a thousand yen bill. After securing his own stash of coins, he turned toward me and bowed with one hand held up in entreaty. "Master, can you spot some money for Baba to play with? I'm a bit short on cash right now."

Ah~hah. Here I was thinking why he called me out to play out the blue. So you wanted me to be your spare wallet, is that so, hmmm?

But well, wouldn't hurt every once in a while, I suppose. Allow me to show you the financial power of an adult! Though my income is entirely managed by Kaburagi-san so it's technically Kaburagi-san's financial power, but let's not worry about that right now.

With a basket holding 10,000 yen worth of coins, we first headed toward the purikura booth. I stood on the left, Shouta-kun took the right, and he helped lift Baba up so that she could also get into the frame. One, two, three, cheese.

"Can't you at least manage a smile, Master?"

"....."

Shouta-kun voiced his question while passing one copy of the freshly printed picture to Baba, but unfortunately he was asking the impossible. *Not when I'm keeping up this reticent, sour-faced character, at least.*

When someone who rarely speaks suddenly starts talking, or someone who never smiles suddenly decides to grin, it makes for a really impactful moment, doesn't it? That's what I wanted to purposely aim for. Therefore this time was part of a setup to maximize the effect of when I actually play that card.

After having accepted the picture, Baba was lightly bending it and flicking it with her fingers, her head tilted in puzzlement.

“What’s wrong, Baba?”

“How do you make the picture become 3D?”

“Like hell it will.” Oh shit! I said that out loud! These people from advanced technology societies and their 3D imaging! They’re always like this! They always think “we can make it 3D, so might as well” like it’s nothing! I think so too though! If only I could make a hologram pop out just by snapping my fingers! Oh right, I can probably do something similar with telekinesis.

After circling around several games, it became evident that Baba was extremely skillful with machinery, had incredible reflexes, and also had a very sharp ear.

When we got to the whack-a-mole, despite holding the hammer in both hands, she pounded the mallet with an almost machine-like precision, managing to get a perfect score.

When we got to the rhythm game, although she was a mess the first playthrough, her speed jumped up noticeably with each round of practice. After clearing five or six songs, she went back to the first one she did and managed a perfect combo just by relying on her dynamic vision and reflexes alone. *These high spec organisms, always doing things like this!*

In contrast, when it came to physical strength, she was as pathetically weak as her loli appearance would suggest. The most she could manage at the boxing machine was a mere 20. For reference, Shouta-kun managed 80, and the average adult male supposedly does 100.

The high score of the month displayed on the machine was 155, so I went ahead and overwrote it with a telekinetic punch that scored 180. The storm of applause and commendation from the surrounding people felt amazing. *Smirk.....*

Shouta-kun badgered me about whether I knew a trick for punching or whether I was doing gym, so I said “Chi cultivation” in a profound-sounding tone just to get him off my case. He looked deeply impressed, but of course that was a lie. *I’m at fault for lying, but how are you just accepting my answer so readily?! Like hell someone can punch out chi! You’ve been reading way too much manga! Oh, but telekinetic punches are real.*

We then headed over to challenge the claw cranes, but the claw was so weak that all of us suffered consecutive defeats with nothing to show for our efforts. Seeing as how it was impossible even for the very embodiment of skillfulness that was Baba, I would probably have a case asserting that those machines had been calibrated wrong.

After losing 800 yen to a flame-design monster plushie, Shouta-kun was at the end of his rope. “Shit. Oi, Baba, can’t you strengthen the arms of the crane with some sort of strengthening magic?”

“There’s no such magic. Also, I can’t use magic in this world.”

“Tsk, the hell. A loli baba who can’t use magic is just a plain old loli baba.”

So you say, Shouta-kun, but do you know how rare it is to come across a real-life loli baba? Although they may be all over the place within fiction, once you turn your eyes toward reality, then their rarity value shoots up through the roof. In fact, it would be on a whole different dimension than little sisters and tsunderes. Fully enjoy this world-shakingly precious experience of getting to live together with a loli baba when you still have the chance. You might even be the very first person on Earth to enjoy this privilege, Shouta-kun.

By the time we had gone around to all the games we all wanted, it had become lunch time. So we decided to grab lunch together.

“I brought my own lunch.”

I decided to completely ignore the hardcore vegetarian who took out an entire half of a cabbage—raw!—from a purple pouch.

It would have been fine to just find a random chain restaurant, but it occurred to me that this was a good time to set up an impromptu mini incident. After making a phone call, I brought Shouta-kun and Baba to the open terrace café that Kaburagi-san liked so much, and secured a table outside.

Shouta-kun ordered a cup of hot coffee and sandwiches, and Baba chose the vegetable juice with no hesitation. When it became my turn to order, I called the phone in my left pocket with the phone in my right pocket, and pretended that I had urgent business to take care of. I threw down a 5,000 yen note to cover their bill, then quickly made my exit. Once I was out of sight, I ducked into

the nearest internet café, locked myself in a private room, and switched to telekinetic monitoring mode.

Well then, this should be a good show! Several tens of minutes later, when Shouta-kun was right in the middle of teaching Baba how to play one of the most popular mobile games at the time with her sitting on his lap, he suddenly heard someone calling out to him.

“.....Shouta? What are you doing?” It was Touka-chan, who *just happened* to pass by, in the middle of carrying out an urgent errand that I had asked of her. I had estimated the distance from Touka-chan’s home and the time it would take her to get herself ready, carefully arranging everything so that she would pass by this café with perfect timing.

Touka-chan, who was in a rather plain outfit composed of black shorts, a gray T-shirt, and a small handbag decorated with the Great Buddha of Nara, directed eyes filled with doubt toward the composition of a dressed up Baba and Shouta-kun in his showy outfit pressed against each other playing a game. From her point of view, surely this looked like Shouta-kun leaving her alone to enjoy a flirty date with a cute little girl. Things were going to blow up! This was my way of giving the two of them a little prodding, as there had been almost no new development in their relationship at all after the Super Water Sphere Incident. But frankly speaking, I just wanted to see a bittersweet scene of an adolescent romance. *Gehehehe*.

“Oh hey, Touka.”

“Touka, good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon to you too. So, what are you two doing? Didn’t you say that you’d be at home doing your homework today?” After kindly returning Baba’s greetings, Touka turned to press Shouta.

Here comes the lovers’ quarrel! Oh yeah! Things are getting fun! I was fully aware that what I was doing was in mega, super, terrible taste. However, my heart could not help but to speed up. It was my hope that this encounter could help Shouta-kun to clarify his attitude toward Touka-chan. *Dammit, I also wanted an experience of being questioned by a pretty girl while having tea with another pretty girl during my adolescence!*

Shouta-kun pulled back slightly from Touka-chan bearing down on him, and, with his eyes shifting all over the place, answered, “Ahh yeah, I finished up earlier than I’d expected. So I thought about visiting this café that Master had recommended.”

“Is that so. I haven’t had lunch yet either. Mind if I join you? This seat is not occupied, right? You mind if I sit here?”

“Sure, why not. Excuse me, waiter!”

Touka-chan readily accepted his reply, lowered herself into the seat next to Shouta’s, and spread open the menu. I initially thought this was an attempt to get in Baba’s way, but soon realized that that was not the case at all. The three of them had begun to chat harmoniously among each other.

Aww..... they’ve just met up like normal. No fighting broke out. Touka-chan’s “What are you doing?” turned out to be just a normal question and not an expression of jealousy at all.

Well, once I thought about it again, it kinda made sense. Baba’s outer appearance was that of a 9-year-old, while on the inside she was a 905-year-old grandma. A girl who would consider either of those forms a proper love rival would have to be quite the piece of work. In other words, Baba was not enough to trigger Touka-chan’s jealousy. And Baba being a baba, the way she looked at the two middle schoolers was completely with the eyes of a grandma looking at grandchildren.

When the conversation was directed to Baba as Touka-chan asked what she thought about her life so far in Japan, Baba stopped picking out the bacon bits in her vegetable salad to think deeply. After a brief moment, she replied, “I love it. Especially the sub-culture here, it is much more developed than it was in my country. Every day is very fun.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I love seeing you laughing every day too.”

“Indeed. I would love it if these days could just go on forever.”

I-Is that so. But isn’t that the kind of line that, after it’s said, won’t ever come true? Possibly because she came from another world, apparently Baba did not know about the concept of “flags” and similar forms of foreshadowing.

According to what she had described so far, it sounded like the sub-culture in her world was practically non-existent. As such, it wouldn't be strange that these concepts were foreign to her.

Though in the first place, this reality was one in which things happen regardless of flags anyways.

After saying "Let's get married after I get back from the war," people still normally come back and get married.

After saying "Like I can stand this any longer! I'm going back to my room!" the person still normally lives on.

It might sound completely uninteresting, but this was "the norm."

But in the same vein, participating in a reckless charge during war would get you killed like normal, and turning your back on a serial killer would mean getting stabbed in the back like normal. A certain amount of effort is required for "these days to go on forever," and a certain amount of reward would come from that certain amount of effort. Though of course, the tragic outcome of effort going unrewarded also being normal was what made reality so shitty.

I very much wanted Baba to put in her bit of effort.

"And that's why, for the sake of protecting this most precious peace, it falls on us to put an end to the World Shadows, and to the demon lord behind them all."

Oh, that part you don't have to put effort into. I don't want to die just yet.

Chapter 6: PSI Drive

After summer break ended, the third-year students said their farewells to their clubs and plunged into test season with great fervor. Although it is said by many that the amount of time invested into studying during the summer break could make or break one's results, the frenzied catching up of the students in sports clubs—who spent their entire summer on their respective sports—from autumn onward was also nothing to scoff at.

Despite having earned nicknames like characters in a manga, FK-kun and BG-chan were third years just like all the rest. Gradually, a greater and greater percentage of conversation among their classmates at school began shifting toward studying. Questions and comments like “How many hours did you study last night?” or “I’ve started attending cram school...” or even “How were your grades on the latest mock exam?” contributed to the sense of urgency felt in the face of the encroaching shadow of the exams. It was enough to make anyone sick.

Thus it fell to me to make sure that our organization members got enough rest by slotting in an appropriate number of World Shadow fights. *Do your best, exam students.*

As for Baba, now that Shouta-kun had resumed going to school and could no longer take her everywhere, she took to commuting to Kaneyama Tech every day in the early morning, throwing herself into designing and testing prototypes of the PSI drive. Because of how close Kaneyama Tech and we were together (in a partners in crime sort of way), the dog tag that I had presented to her had the effect of Koumon Mito's seal case. It didn't matter that she had silver hair, or that she was an elf, or that she looked like a little girl, or that her hands had more flexibility than was humanly possible; the staff received her welcomingly and courteously, careful not to pry too deep.

Honestly, what with our “mysterious technology” for lifting rare metals and methane hydrate from the bottom of the ocean and the Black Box that we had

lent them, the workers at Kaneyama Tech probably had at least a nagging suspicion regarding the real identities of the espers who played such prominent roles in the Super Water Sphere Incident. However, they were all smart enough to keep their mouths shut.

In actual fact, my supply of rare metals and methane hydrate was the very heart of this up-and-coming start-up company. If they went around saying “We’re working with the espers,” then I would cut off their supply and the company would die right then and there. Therefore, there was absolutely no way that Kaneyama Tech would rat us out. And if that wasn’t enough, the young president was head over heels for Kaburagi-san too.

The latest addition to my daily schedule was to drive to the Takahashi residence around the time when Shouta-kun left for school to give Baba a lift to Kaneyama Tech and then drive her back around dusk. She was not of an age where she would be getting lost, but her appearance being what it is, there was a slight worry that the police might take her into protective custody if they saw her walking alone on the streets during the day.

In addition, her physical strength was average, and she had no experience with martial arts or anything of the sort. Therefore, it would actually be quite problematic if she got attacked by lolicons or hoodlums in these days of worsening public order due to the sharp influx of foreign tourists. That said, she had very sharp situational awareness skills and prided herself on being able to run away really fast, so the chances of something terrible happening to her were low. However, it never hurt to be extra careful.

In regards to how Baba had no legal identity, I was expecting Kaburagi-san to do something about it once she revived. I had even thought up the cover story that Baba was a genius kid from Marineland—the country that Kaburagi-san had received her duchess peerage from—who had skipped through mandatory education in its entirety.

While driving Baba everyday, I also took the opportunity to check in on the progress of the development of the PSI drive. What I saw fascinated me to no end.

Kaneyama Tech was buying all necessary manufacturing machinery second-

hand from small factories that were downsizing or going out of business, and Baba displayed an astonishing ability of being able to master them all in the blink of an eye. She apparently could even do detailed work on the micron scale by hand. A fifty-something master mechanic who just happened to be overseeing one of the machines being set up was extremely astonished, commenting that she “does the work of three copies of the best guy in my factory.”

The point was, she was incredibly fast and incredibly precise. When she encountered especially detailed parts that required particularly still hands, she would even stop her heart to eliminate even the slightest bit of hand shaking. For someone who wouldn't use magic, she sure was managing quite inhuman feats at a regular basis. *As expected of an elf, I suppose.*

The supernatural machine made of platinum that would run on blood from espers as fuel—confirmed to be named “PSI drive” going forward—could be generally thought of as the three main components of “engine,” “frame,” and “fuel.”

The engine was made out of tiny platinum parts carved with complicated grooves all joined together so finely that the whole thing was only about the size of someone's thumb. Because the affinity with superpowers would drop if the platinum was alloyed with other metals to increase its toughness, the parts themselves were pure platinum, but then supported by an exoskeleton made of a titanium alloy. When fuel was supplied to this engine, it would activate while amplifying the effects of the superpower in the fuel.

The frame was necessary to protect the engine and also make it usable. In the same way, a car does not move with just the engine and fuel. It also needs tires, brakes, gears, and a steering wheel, just to name a few. A whole mountain of supporting parts are necessary for that engine to be useful. All the detailed theories flew entirely over my head, but this was the main gist that I got.

The fuel was, of course, the blood of an esper. However, this also needed to be processed. From a simple experiment performed with Shouta-kun's blood, it was determined that what the PSI drive needed was not technically “an esper's blood,” but only the red blood cells. In fact, the other components, such as white blood cells and platelets, were actually in the way. Throwing blood in as is

would still activate the PSI drive, but the fuel efficiency would be pretty bad.

Consequently, there was a need to separate out the blood and mix the red blood cells with preservative liquid to process it into high concentration fuel. However, as the core component of the fuel was still the red blood cells, the fuel came with an expiration date of a hundred days, which is the lifespan of red blood cells. In other words, after a hundred days, the red blood cells would die, rendering the fuel useless.

After processing, the blood fuel would have to be preserved in refrigeration. If there was a need to carry it around, it would have to be carried together with some means of keeping it cool. During storage, the fuel would be a dark red due to the lack of oxygen, so before usage, one would have to pump in enough oxygen to activate all the red blood cells and turn them into a vivid red. Only then can it be loaded into the PSI drive. And well, that was the rundown.

What this meant was that after production, we would need to keep an eye on the expiry date of each pack of fuel, and also arrange for their disposal and replacement periodically. Honestly, it sounded like a huge pain.

Two weeks into her research, Baba successfully completed the commemorable prototype number one. It was a PSI drive in the form of a silver-colored short sword.

The interior was so complicated that it was completely beyond my comprehensive ability, but apparently this prototype was still a highly simplified version in Baba's eyes. According to her, the superpower amplification was weak and the output was still very low.

The titanium alloy used in the frame and exoskeleton was apparently something that did not exist in Baba's world, so she had no idea how it would affect the product as a whole. The prototype could be a failure, or worst case, it could maybe even explode.

Well, the whole point of making a prototype was to test it. And so, a plastic cartridge the size of the fingernail of a pinky finger packed with fuel processed from Touka-chan's blood was loaded into the hilt of the short sword. Two times it failed to activate, calling for some final adjustments.

Inside Kaneyama Tech's fire-proofed experiment room, with myself and

several research staff with fire extinguishers in hand watching, finally, on the third try, the PSI drive activated.

“Uwah!”

“Ohhh!”

“No way, it actually worked?!”

The flames spurting out from the short sword elicited cries of astonishment and wonder from the researchers. In spite of having had all the theory explained to me previously, I was still very surprised seeing it in person.

With the realization of the PSI drive, the world had officially entered the era where non-espers could still wield superpowers.

Whereas the fuel made of red blood cells would require regular replenishment and disposal, this characteristic also made it easy to maintain secrecy. On one hand, the management necessary due to long-term preservation not being an option was indeed a lot of trouble. However, on the flip side, in the slight chance that we ever accidentally lose one of these things, they would automatically become harmless after a hundred days. This was a very useful failsafe to prevent any unintended spread of superpowers.

At the moment, we had only a short sword that could emit fire. However, if we could effectively lend out my telekinesis, then the breadth and scale of our events would widen enormously. I could dream so much bigger. This was absolutely wonderful. I very much wanted Baba to continue working hard at this.

I approached Baba as she flung her hand around in an attempt to cool it down after deactivating the flames coming from the sword. “Congratulations on your success. I’m sorry to press you, but can you also make a PSI drive in the form of one of those wands seen in magical girl anime?”

“Hm? I can indeed. Why would you wish for—ahh, for Touka?”

“No, for Kaburagi-san.”

“.....Has there been a mistake in the Japanese that I’ve learned? Are magical girls not something preferred by young maidens? Kaburagi is an adult, if my

memory serves me true. Would such an item not be to her taste?” Baba looked quite puzzled.

Oh right, Kaburagi-san became bedridden quite soon after she joined us, so the two of them haven’t had much contact with each other yet.

“Not a problem. Kaburagi-san likes magical girls.”

“???”

“Is that an issue?”

“Ahh, no, I mind it not. A great tree with weak branches is but mere firewood. To the same, the hero’s companions must also be strong. I have no objections to making a weapon for Kaburagi.”

Baba accepted my request readily, but then she continued while proffering the short sword to me. “Tell Shouta to attack one of the demon lord’s subordinates with this sword. Depending on the outcome, I will be making further improvements.”

“Got it.”

That’s right. That’s the important part. But well, I have my barrier, so I should be fine, I think? This is supposedly a low quality test product anyway, so it probably won’t cause any big issues.

I was thoroughly familiar with how disappointing reality was. There was no way that a mere short sword like this could damage me in any way.

Let’s have Shouta-kun go casually stab a World Shadow then.



“Gueh!”

On the evening of the day that I passed the short sword to Shouta-kun, I cried out alone in Ama-no-Iwato, falling to my knees while clutching my stomach.

The instant Shouta-kun stabbed the humanoid World Shadow that he was fighting in the underground sewers with the flaming short sword, pain shot through my stomach even though I had been bracing myself half in seriousness. The wine glass that I dropped shattered on the ground. *That hurts, dammit!*

Although the amount of pain was nothing in comparison to when I tore my telekimuscle, pain was still pain.

I flipped my shirt up to check my stomach, and sure enough, there was indeed a little bit of blood oozing out. Ig immediately reached out with her front paws and healed me in an instant, but I had indeed been hurt. It was not that I had bumped something or cut myself. Judging by the timing, there was no room for doubt. I had indeed shared a portion of the damage that Shouta-kun had dealt to the World Shadow.

“Ahh, goddammit!”

I got up and scratched my hair irately. What is this? It actually works? This is a complete success! What, so I’m an actual demon lord? I had my barrier up but it just penetrated right through! This stupid barrier is no help whatsoever! More like, I don’t recall ever having been helped by it at all!

The damage that reached me, be it feedback or infection or any other way, did not feel like it had slipped through my barrier so much as piercing through it. There was the possibility that I could train myself to defend against it, but that was quite iffy, seeing as how even a trash-tier prototype could already get to me so easily. I shuddered to imagine what would happen if it was the perfected hero’s sword that had been used.

Ahh~ahh~ahh~ahh~ahh~. Everything’s going to hell. I’m so sick of this. Is this happening because Baba’s from another world? Cus it’s technology from another world? Just because this was made using techniques that originated from another world, it could penetrate this barrier of mine that can even completely deflect an asteroid the size of what made all the dinosaurs go extinct?

Goddamn reality, always fucking me over with its unreasonable shit.

But this was happening for real.

This was already.....

No.....

But.....

.....I'm sorry, Baba. This won't do. There's no way I can leave this be. I fully understand your yearning for the extraordinary and your burning zeal to defeat a demon lord. I respect, from the very bottom of my heart, the unwavering resolve and passion that drove you to part with your home world of 905 years and take the plunge of crossing into another world. Your intent to protect this world's peace by eradicating the World Shadows and defeating the demon lord is indeed splendid and noble. If possible, I would have loved to make this dream of yours come true. I mean every word of this. This is something that you've yearned for for several hundreds of years. Compared to Kaburagi-san and myself, who haven't even made it past thirty, I'm sure that what you feel is unbelievably deeper, unbelievably heavier, and unbelievably more expansive. I can't even begin to imagine how you feel.

However, even so, I cannot go on with this. Not after I've learned that supporting your dream means I could actually die for real. Even if it's for you, my great senpai on the path of chasing one's dreams, I'm afraid I cannot give you my life.

Former queen of the Alvu race and great mechanic of another world, Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan. I'm terribly sorry, but I am going to need you to join me on the set-up side of this great charade.

Chapter 7: You've Got to Fight Back Against Reality

The very next day after it was confirmed that the PSI drive could indeed deal damage to me, I immediately called Baba into the interview room located in the underground base. This was our second one-on-one within two weeks' time.

Last time, I questioned Baba about the specs of the PSI drive and eventually issued the GO sign. This time, however, depending on how things went, I was resolved to put a stop to the development in the worse case scenario.

I intended to explain everything going on behind the scenes to Baba.

The best outcome would be her agreeing to join us on the set-up side. Honestly speaking, there was already too much to do for Kaburagi-san and me alone, to the point where we weren't sure if we could recruit any more members into the organization. As a perfect example, now that Kaburagi-san was down for the count, I was having to shoulder on everything all by myself. With her ability to make PSI drives and her wealth of experience in politics, Baba could make for an extremely reliable addition to our team.

The next best outcome was, despite refusing to join the set-up team, her still agreeing to keep her mouth shut about us. I thought that this was the most likely scenario.

Kaburagi-san and I were both having plenty of fun being on the back end. In contrast, Baba had been so eager to embark on an adventure that she had even crossed worlds. Would she truly be happy being on our side of the curtain?

There was a possibility that she wouldn't see the appeal of it. If that was truly the case, then there was no helping it. At the very least, I would have her maintain her silence, so that she doesn't steal away the dreams of the general organization members.

She might have the appearance of a little girl, but she was a full-grown adult. And not just your run-of-the-mill adult, but a living, talking, breathing archaeological find of more than nine centuries in age. Regardless of how she

felt, I wanted to trust that she wouldn't expose the dirty truth to a pair of adolescents enjoying their youth and inflict severe trauma to their hearts. I wasn't sure whether she would join the set-up team, but was relatively sure that I could get her to promise to maintain her silence.

The worst outcome would be heartbreak or rage. Baba had put everything on the line and discarded everything she had to come to this world. The fact that "it was all just make-believe!" was surely going to be an incredible shock.

Extreme heartbreak might cause her to hang herself.

Extreme rage might cause her to die from a fit of anger.

I hadn't the faintest idea how to calm down emotions accumulated over several hundreds of years. If she allowed all her packed-up emotions to explode all at once, then I would not be able to handle it. Though I would still do the best I could.

If her anger led her to go mad or try to kill me with all caution thrown to the wind, then I would have had to keep her under house arrest until Kaburagi-san and I could come up with a countermeasure.

I very much wanted to avoid the pathetic development of me messing things up and waiting for Kaburagi-san to fix everything for me. The best way to avoid that would be to consult her before doing something this momentous, of course. However, despite having said that she'd recuperate in a week's time, two weeks had already passed, and she had yet to be seen. There was no way I could bring myself to burden her with anything more when she was already so down from the significant mental trauma that she had received. That meant I had to deal with all of this by myself somehow.

.....Up till now, I've been leaving all the coordination and negotiation necessary to keep the organization running up to Kaburagi-san without giving it much thought, but could it be that she's been dealing with things like this all the time? Just this one matter alone is already enough to stretch me to my limits. How does she handle numerous issues like this at the same time? She really is incredible.

And therefore, Baba and I were sitting across from each other with a table in between once again, two weeks on. Baba was bouncing on top of the sofa,

happily enjoying the soft and springy feeling. The child-like display seemed very fitting for her appearance, but I worried whether she was regressing in mental age. However, the more she had regressed and the more fun she looked like she was having, the greater the fall would be when the shock I delivered her slapped her to the ground.

I was no master conversationalist, but what I did have was earnestness. My best strategy was to be honest and frank, not holding anything back and not relying on any petty tricks.

As a countermeasure against the one in a million chance of the middle school students coming in, I used telekinesis to lock the door, and set up a telekinetic soundproof barrier. Then I jump-started the conversation. “Ahem. So, the reason why I called you out this time.....”

“Yes?” Baba stopped bouncing, instead leaning forward with her jade-colored eyes glittering brightly. An “I’m having so much fun!” aura was emanating from every part of her body.

The sight almost made me lose heart.

Should I really tell this baba the truth? Wouldn't it be too cruel? Surely it'd be better to let her continue dreaming..... But no, if I leave her be, I'll die.

After gathering my resolve one more time, I said, “Long story short, everything so far has been a set-up. The demon lord and the hero are both a mere charade. I’m really sorry.”

“Nya?” uttered Baba in bewilderment, apparently having slipped back into her native tongue due to surprise.

I then dived straight into my explanation. “You’re probably having trouble understanding what I’m talking about. So I’ll start from ten years ago, the day when I abruptly awakened to my superpower—”

At first, Baba looked very doubtful, but that gradually shifted into astonishment. By the time I was almost done, she was so enraged that her white skin had turned thoroughly red.

“—And that’s why, for the sake of protecting my own life, I—”

“Y-You, ym, yo f kucu doiti! Csum csuerk cmohektfurer! Kufc! Kufc yo ssomlaue!!!”

Before I could finish, Baba kicked her sofa away and leaped over the table to grab my collar, pushing me down in the process. I hadn't the faintest idea what she was saying, but I had a very strong feeling that she was cursing me with extremely foul language. I decided to quietly accept it all.

Whereas part of me watched on detachedly, thinking “Ahh, so she's going the rage route. Well that sucks, it's the worst one of them all,” another part of me wanted to cry too at the sight of the tears welling up from the edge of Baba's eyes as she splayed saliva everywhere in her rage.

Ahhh, please don't cry. I knew I shouldn't have told you after all. But please forgive me. I don't want to die either. The one in the wrong here is this shitty reality. Why did Baba come to this shithole of a world?



The moment Baba came here, our world had become closed off. Never again would Earth have another visitor from another world. At the same time, that also meant that there would be absolutely no traveling to another world. Fantasy itself had shredded the dreams promised by fantasy.

This is just the worst. The worst circumstances overlapped with the worst outcome to create the worst outcome ever. However, let me say this. Even though I'm a young brat who hasn't even lived a tenth of what you have, please let me say my point in my young, bratty way.

"I'm pretty sure nothing I say would get through to you right now, but....." I held Baba's face with both my hands as she continued to weakly pound my chest while muttering curses nonstop, having tired herself out screaming and raging. I looked straight into her eyes, which had gone all puffy from crying, and said, "This is what reality is like. No matter how long you wait, no matter how much you cry, nothing will change. There's no other way but to accept it and push forward. Everything you want, you have to win it for yourself."

Once again, poisonous-sounding words flowed from Baba's mouth, and she glared at me fiercely. If she possessed the power to kill someone by staring at them, I reckon I would have died at least three times already.

However, as I continued staring into those eyes while shaking in fear and trying my best to push back a sense of nausea triggered by powerlessness and heartache, I noticed the strength leaving her eyes, until finally she hung her head.

After a long, long silence, Baba got off from on top of me, then returned to her sofa. "It is as you say," she muttered, while fiddling with the leaves on the branch stuck in her hair.

While keeping an eye on her, I also timidly returned to my own sofa.

"Perhaps I indeed have been running away from reality."

"Running away? No, you stood against it," I retorted inadvertently to her fainthearted admission. Discarding one's home and social status and fortune to go to another world was not something that most people could do. Baba had also stood up against shitty reality in her own way. What she had done was

worthy of commendation.

However, Baba shook her head. “No, that is not so. If I really did mean to stand in opposition to this, then I would have made the effort back in mine own world. If I couldn’t find anything interesting, then I should have searched for companions, and *made* something interesting to do together. However, I merely abandoned the world, betrayed everyone I knew, and threw them away. I ran away. Never once did I try to change the world like you’re doing.”

“That’s—”

“Don’t be modest. Compliments are to be accepted gracefully. Sigh, to think that I would have my own mistakes pointed out to me even at this age. I suppose this is what it means when they say that there are lessons to be learned even from young saplings.”

I could not detect any more anger in Baba’s earnest tone. She could very well be just hiding her anger very skillfully. However, if I wasn’t a complete idiot at discerning people’s emotions, then that meant Baba was indeed coming to terms with her anger and grief with incredible speed and was already trying to move on.

“It appears that the time has come where I, too, face and acknowledge reality. I offer my apologies for all the things I said. Allow me to be the one to ask you: May I be allowed to join you and Kaburagi in the set-up team?”

“Baba.....!”

I was thoroughly touched as Baba wiped her tears away. *She wasn’t a former queen for nothing, I suppose.*

The older one gets, the harder it becomes to admit one’s wrongs. While telling children “when you do something wrong, say ‘I’m sorry’,” there are so many people who become unable to put that into practice themselves. Children don’t apologize earnestly, and adults don’t apologize at all. The idea that people would “learn to be better when they grow up” is a lie. There are heaps of people who, the more knowledge they accumulate, the more they would try to hide behind convoluted logic and semantics, getting defensive and doing whatever it takes to worm out of admitting to being in the wrong. Adults are absolute pros at pushing blame around. However, Baba was able to look back

and reflect on herself. Even though I did not think that she was in the wrong, she was the one who remonstrated herself.

Being able to self-reflect and change even at 905 years old? She's incredible. I hope I can be just like her when I get old.

As I superimposed my idea of the perfect grandpa onto the silver-haired elf loli baba sitting quietly on her sofa, the sound of the doorknob being tried abruptly pulled me back to my senses.

A beat later came the sound of the door being unlocked. It swung open, revealing Kaburagi-san standing there in a red dress decorated with an abundance of frills and lace. Her previously haggard face had completely returned back to normal.

“So this is where you both were. I’m sorry, I ended up taking two wee—”

The resurrected Kaburagi-san took a look at the room and froze. I also froze.

Locked room with only the two of us. A loli baba with disheveled clothes and eyes puffy from crying. The sofas and table in unnatural positions after having been kicked around by Baba in her rampage. There was a lack of comprehension on Baba’s face, as she probably thought herself completely beyond that age, but I could feel my own face twitching uncontrollably.

The circumstantial evidence was...bad. This looked completely like the aftermath of a round of impure fraternization between two people of opposite genders (from different worlds to boot).

Kaburagi-san almost backed up a step, but she made a clear effort to stand her ground. “Lolic—no, I mean, surely there’s an explanation...?”

“Y-Yes! Yes there is! Listen to this!” *Pheewww! I’m so glad that Kaburagi-san is a calm person. Oh god, so glad.*

I quickly explained what had just happened. Then the three of us shared information with each other, after which Kaburagi-san closed her eyes and rubbed her glabella.

“There is a lot that I want to say, but I’ll choose just one: If you were going to pull Baba-san in, why didn’t you come to me for advice? This is a huge matter,

isn't it?"

"I mean, I didn't want to burden you with this....."

"It becomes an even bigger burden if you don't consult me. It is for times like these that I'm here, right? From now on, never be reserved about consulting me, all right?"

"All right. Sorry I didn't do it this time."

"I'm glad we're on the same page now."

Just when the conversation had wrapped up nicely, Baba interrupted with a smirk on her face, "Kaburagi, this charmer here was plotting on giving you a present to lift your spirits in the midst of your weakened state. A magical, what was it? Stick?"

"Oi, shush!"

"Oh, is that so? That makes me so happy!" Kaburagi-san smiled at me like a flower blooming. *Kuahh, so bright! And what the hell you ratting me out for, you baba! Stop smiling like a grandma looking at two youngsters at a marriage interview!*

"I'll look forward to this present, then. It sounds like a lot has happened during the time I was away, but first things first, I'll arrange for a Marineland citizenship for Baba-san. Let's go with the story that she had completed the mandatory education by skipping grades then. I'll make the arrangements so that the country would also back the story up if anyone ever digs into it, so rest assured."

Kaburagi-san quickly changed topics and moved the conversation on at a brisk pace, so I also followed suit.

"One more thing from me. This is pretty much my nature or disposition, but my training fever is acting up again. I want to train to defend against the PSI drive so badly that I can't help myself. When I get hurt by attacks made with a PSI drive, it feels like the attacks are penetrating my defense. They aren't disabling my barrier or simply just phasing through. They penetrate. I think that after some ten or hundred reps, I might be able to acquire a certain resistance against the PSI drive. There's a chance that it won't work out, because the

attacks are following rules of another world, but I still want to give it a shot. Baba, would you mind helping me with this?"

"Ah..... Sure. Yes, allow me to do so. I'm also quite curious how far the weapons I make can get through that iron defense of yours. At the moment, it merely feels like being stung by a mosquito, right?"

"If I had to say, it's more like being slashed by a praying mantis. What about you, though? Is there anything specific that you want to try or want to find out?"

Baba quietly thought on my question for a short while. Then finally, she said, "The fact that all of the threats so far had been external pressure gives me slight pause."

"External pressure?"

Kaburagi-san parroted her back, at which Baba nodded.

"These so-called 'events' of yours have all consisted of introducing an external enemy or threat, and then resisting and defeating said threat. Though I agree that such challenges are easy to understand and are considerably fun in their own way, that in itself is not enough. You also need internal pressure as well."

"Internal pressure.....which means an enemy from within? Are you suggesting a traitor event?"

"Indeed."

Uhh, that's a bit..... I mean, developments like there being a traitor within or an internal rift are indeed quite common among secret organizations, but would that really make for a "fun adolescence"?

"Baba-san, we aren't playing around with Shouta-kun and Touka-chan. What we want is to let them have a good time."

Kaburagi-san gave voice to my own thoughts in an admonishing tone, but Baba shook her head.

"An adolescence of fun alone is brittle. Those brought up to be wary against only external enemies are exceptionally susceptible to attacks from within. Trials and tribulations are equally necessary for a tree to grow strong enough to

withstand even storms and earthquakes. After overcoming difficulties and learning to make compromises, they can eventually laugh about this when they become adults. Only by including this can their adolescence be said to have been fulfilling. Am I wrong in what I said?”

Kaburagi-san and I both groaned in thought. Baba had a point. No, I felt like it was more like thr—ok, maybe like five points front to back.

Internal pressure, was it? Interesting.

I was slightly hesitant, as the idea felt slightly like making two youngsters who were enjoying their adolescence suddenly having to come face to face with the dirty world of adults. However, this was indeed much better than allowing them to grow up sheltered in a greenhouse without knowing anything, and then one day leaving their homes to step into this shitty reality without being properly prepared. Now that would be the true tragedy.

Difficulties incite growth. This I understood. The same concept had been behind Shouta-kun’s unwinnable fight.

But still, even without us doing anything, soon enough suffering is going to pay them visits and reality is going to rear its ugly head. Do we really need to go to the trouble of preparing more suffering for them..... but maybe by giving them a gentler suffering with a safety net in place, it could help them gain some resistance against the hardcore sufferings of real life..... Hmm.....

.....Why am I stressing myself over this as if I’m actually raising a child?

“I think it’s a good idea. Although we would have to carefully fine-tune things so that they aren’t traumatized for life.”

“I shall keep that in mind. So we are agreed on this internal discord—nay, this traitor event? Allow me to take on the role of the traitor. I believe this should cause less psychological damage than it being either one of the two of you, who had already been here before they joined.”

“What do you think, Sago-san?”

While I was deep in thought, the girls had already moved the conversation along. When Kaburagi-san directed the conversation to me, I came to a start.

A traitor event, huh.

It sounds like it would be quite tough to pull off, but..... well, let's do it! I would also feel bad rejecting the first idea proposed by the brand-new addition to our set-up team. In the first place, adolescence is made up of both tears and laughter. If I think of this as the "tears" part, then it's actually quite in line with our goals.

Now that I've decided to do it, I'll be giving this traitor event everything I've got. I can't wait to get started!>

Chapter 8: The Respective Masters Who Just Missed Each Other

In the evening on one of the days during the period of time when we were making preparations for the traitor event, just when I was looking for the car keys so that I could go pick Baba up from Kaneyama Tech, Kaburagi-san suddenly came to a start as if something had occurred to her, and then she said, “Be careful of the police.”

As I tilted my head, wondering where this had come from, Kaburagi-san turned halfway in her seat at the counter and waved the script of the event that she was working on while continuing.

“More specifically, by ‘police,’ I mean all the investigative organizations crawling around Tokyo, really. Although I’m pulling strings in many places, I’m still having a bit of trouble with CIA and the Public Security Intelligence Agency. It’s going to take quite a bit of effort planning the event while also taking into account the police’s movements.”

This is something that can be handled with “a bit of effort”? Aren’t CIA and PSIA respectively the biggest intelligence agencies of America and Japan.....? Although she has the enormous advantage of a superpower and it seems that she has other people running around for her, she’s still effectively fending off entire countries on an individual level, right? That’s amazing.

No wait, theoretically, it should be possible. I mean, in actual fact, she’s pulling it off even now. And those organizations also have rather tarnished histories of being led around the nose by fake religious cults and whatnot. With a capable leader at the helm, and everyone following orders properly, concealing information from a country or throwing them off scent was very much possible. But that said, “it’s possible” doesn’t automatically translate into “I can do it.” At the very least, even though I have my telekinesis, I can hardly imagine myself being able to pull it off. The only thing I am capable of is overwhelming displays of power, such as killing off all the members of every

single intelligence agency in the world in a single night. So basically, yea, Kaburagi-san is freaking amazing.

“You’re always such an enormous help. In comparison, I’m always just messing things up and causing trouble for you. Sorry.” Come to think of it, Kaburagi-san is looking after my livelihood and often hangs out with me and even takes care of me. Am I her kept man?

As I expressed my contrition, Kaburagi-san lifted an eyebrow slightly while responding, “Be careful, too much humility can come across as sarcasm. Although it’s true that I’m drop-dead gorgeous and super smart and extremely rich and have an amazing personality.....”

“Eehhh.....” You’re going to say that about yourself? Though it’s all true, but still.....

Though admittedly, if Kaburagi-san referred to herself as ugly and stupid and poor and had a terrible personality, now that would indeed have been sarcasm.

“There are people around the world who can do what I can. If two or three people slightly inferior to me got together, they could completely replace me, and maybe even do a slightly better job at it. But in contrast, is there anyone who can replace you, Sago-san? How many other telekinetics are out there? And who among them can bestow superpowers to other people? Are they using their superpowers for someone else’s sake? Sago-san, I think it an enormous honor to have been chosen by you. There is not a single thing that you need to feel reserved about with me. Please have a bit more confidence in yourself. Even if you have the most confidence in the world, I would still think it fitting. You *are* literally the most powerful person in the world, after all.”

“S-Sure, okay.”

I felt like her words had been a bit extreme, but the gist of what she was saying made sense. After being told again and again that I was useless and worthless during those years I spent in that exploitative company, maybe I had indeed lost my self-confidence. *Let’s try to be a bit more confident, then.*

Ah, here are the car keys. Guess I should bring some a random gift for the Kaneyama Tech guys while popping in.



A mere thirty minutes after resolving to be more confident, I found myself being questioned by a police officer sitting in a café filled with a burnt smell.

“I’m sorry, this is just procedure. We’ll be done soon, so could you wait just a little longer?”

“Yeah, okay.....”

All this right after I just got warned to be careful of the police. I could almost feel my confidence being whittled down. However, I wanted very much to make the case that half of what happened was beyond my control.

What started it all was that I had arrived at Kaneyama Tech earlier than planned, and thus decided to kill time at a nearby café until the pick-up time.

While sitting in my seat after having ordered a cup of coffee, a man obviously touched in the head entered the store dramatically by kicking the door, shouting “I’M FIIRREEEEEE MAAAANN!!!” while rampaging about with fire spraying from his hands.

Tokyo of late was fast becoming a bargain sale of such people with a few screws loose. As a result of all the eccentrics and oddballs gathering in Tokyo due to the Super Water Sphere Incident, a certain number of crazies also gathering was perhaps inevitable.

The reason why Baba, a real life otherworlder with elf ears, didn’t stand out so much was because pain in the asses like this “Fire Man” here were popping up here and there, grabbing everybody’s eyes and ears with their flashy antics. I wasn’t sure if it was meant as tribute to BG and FK, but there was an inordinate number of people rampaging about with ice or fire.

Whereas more than half of the outbreak were just street performers innocently doing routines on the streets (without police permission), among them were some who were literally assaulting nearby people. Doing an about turn immediately upon encountering such people was becoming an iron rule of common sense.

I should also have ran away quickly before getting caught up in the commotion. However, my luck ran out the moment I stupidly decided to hide

under a table in my panic. By the time I remembered that I was an esper who had a barrier that could withstand even molten lava permanently deployed around myself and crawled out from under the table sheepishly, it was already after the café store owner, whose apron had gotten singed, had already immobilized the staggering Fire Man by smashing a chair onto his head.

How does it look that a store owner fighting against an invader of his store showed more guts and resolve than the boss of a secret organization who supposedly fights against shadows of the world? I've really got to pull myself together.

After that, I decided to bank on the one in a million chance of the perp being a naturally-occurring pyrokinetic and stayed behind to observe him and make sure, and consequently ended up missing my window of opportunity to run away. Nearby policemen who had heard the commotion arrived at the store, and so I ended up being subjected to questioning.

The result of my checking when I helped the store owner tie Fire Man up was that he had a makeshift flamethrower composed of a ventilator and spray can filled with gasoline hidden inside his sleeves. In other words, he was a bogus esper. Although I did feel a touch of the extraordinary from the Fire Man who was being escorted away by police, bluntly put, he was just a common arsonist. He deserved no sympathy or salvation.

The police apparently intended to take statements from all ten-something customers who had been in the store, and so I was made to stand against the wall to wait for my turn. I had already given Baba a call to explain the situation briefly and inform her that I would be late in picking her up.

“.....Master? Aren't you the Master of Ama-no-Iwato?”

“Hm?”

The person who had been made to line up next to me suddenly peered into my face and talked to me.

For a brief second, I thought, “Who's this guy?”, but then quickly remembered him as one of the very few regular customers at Ama-no-Iwato. He was a middle-aged man with a face that looked half Japanese and an aura of someone really good at their job. Every time he came to the store, he would do

so in a suit, and would drink until he passed out.

It wouldn't be an over-exaggeration to say that a certain percentage of underground bar Ama-no-Iwato's income was supported by this very man. I did not know his name nor his job, but judging by his clothing choice, spending ability, and demeanor, it was my guess that he was probably someone relatively important in a large company.

"Who'd have thought that we'd meet each other here. Isn't it such a coincidence, Master?"

I nodded to convey my agreement. At the moment, I was acting out the reticent and sour-faced bar master. Although he wasn't an entire stranger, neither were we close enough for me to engage him in a frank conversation.

"Master, do you come visit this café often?"

".....Dropped in by chance."

"Talk about being unlucky, right? Ahh, me? I'm here cus I have a job interview."

Job interview? At this time of the year? It's autumn now, though.

"I know it's a weird time of the year, but they supposedly have positions even for mid-season hires."

I thought I had kept up my sour look, but apparently my doubt had been visible on my face, so he answered my un-asked question amiably.

"Would you happen to have heard of it? It's a place called Kaneyama Tech, and it's located a street away from here. I heard that they're hiring for someone to oversee their night shift guards. So I thought this could be a chance for me to use my special skill."

Ah~hah! I bet he's gotten himself fired and is therefore looking for a job in this off-season time. Guess he's having it tough too. But that said... Kaneyama Tech, huh. Talk about coincidences. Because they've rapidly become a large company due to the abrupt expansion made possible by Kaburagi-san and my support, I've heard that they're short-handed and thus accepting talented personnel left and right regardless of the season. However, this is my first time meeting

someone hoping to get hired at Kaneyama Tech. I suppose their name really has gotten prominent enough that job seekers around Tokyo are actually giving them proper consideration.

As I mused over the surprise I felt at encountering this unexpected connection, the guy's smile clouded over and he sighed. "However, due to this commotion, I have missed my interview. I mean, I did call them to explain what had happened, but then they told me that I don't have to force myself to come. That was most likely a roundabout way of saying that I've been rejected, right? Or should I go still, but lower my head in apology? What do you think, Master?"

I brought my hand to my chin in contemplation.

Should he go to Kaneyama Tech's interview or not?Though I agree that he probably shouldn't force himself to go on a day like this. He should go home and rest up first. It probably would be asking a bit too much to demand that a job applicant head straight over to an interview immediately after having been caught up in an arsonist incident.

He should let go of some of that tension in his shoulders. In fact, how about I have him go home for the day to calm down first, and then I introduce him to Kaneyama Tech another day?Yep, let's do that. And I'd meant to give this to the guys at Kaneyama, but oh well.

"It's been a tough day for you. Hope it gets better."

I reached into my bag and took out a bottle of Japanese rice wine of the slightly more expensive kind. When I passed it to the man, he broke into a smile. I knew that he was a severe wine-lover. *Probably an alcohol addict, if I had to guess.*

"Wow! This? You're giving it to me? I won't return it, you know. You sure about this?"

"Mm. Please continue patronizing us."

"You bet I will! Ahh, I am going to enjoy tonight so much! Thank you very much!"

Glad to see you've recovered your spirits. I'm sure the wine would be happy too.

After he finished being questioned, he left with a spring in his step while cradling the wine bottle as if it was a piece of treasure. Apparently he had decided against going to Kaneyama Tech today, opting to go straight home to enjoy a cup instead.

Oh yes, it's consideration like this that builds up the relationship with customers. I'm totally doing it right. Smirk.....

"Apologies for the wait. We'll keep this brief, it should only take about 5 minutes. Firstly, what's your name?"

".....Kinemitsu Sago."

After the alcohol addict dude, it was my turn.

Upon being asked my name by the policeman, I hesitated for a brief moment, but decided to go with my real name after all. I felt like it would have been a safer choice to use a false name, but I was afraid of the consequences if I was ever exposed. It would be like advertising that I had something to hide.

Kaburagi-san had previously told me that instead of doing a botch job of hiding things, acting confidently and boldly is much less likely to draw other people's suspicion. Be honest most of the time, and only tweak the facts the tiniest bit when necessary. That is the best way of doing things.

The policeman asked me whether I knew anything about the arsonist's motive and I answered as best I could, but my voice was shaking a little from the fear of being outed as an esper from some unexpected angle. But then again, I wasn't the only person acting a bit shifty. Many other people also looked very bewildered and were struggling to maintain a proper conversation. On the flip side, it could perhaps be said that my nervousness made me blend in even better.

Thinking about it, anyone would act a bit weird upon being pressured by the police so soon right after having being a victim of an arsonist attempt. I highly doubted that I was the only person who, even if I was squeaky clean, would feel a bit sick from the unease and mental strain of facing a police officer.

I recalled that time during my middle school years when I got called out by a policeman—who I hadn't noticed standing in the shade of a tree on the

sidewalk—right after I jaywalked. From desperation born of a certainty that I was about to get arrested, I tried my best—and failed—to play innocent, barely holding back tears the entire time. I mean, the policeman literally saw me jaywalking, so of course there was no way to gloss over it. However, I did not get arrested. I only got a verbal warning, and my parents and school were not contacted.

That should have been obvious. If the police arrested every single middle schooler who jaywalked, then the overwhelming majority of Japanese people would have a criminal record. However, the fact of being questioned by a policeman was so nerve-wracking that it had completely slipped my mind. That was what made police questioning so troublesome.

But even so, I somehow managed to not bungle anything and safely got through this time's questioning, and the policeman pronounced me acquitted. Once again, I headed over to Kaneyama Tech to pick Baba up.

Even though her pick up was late, Baba-chan (905 years old) behaved herself and waited for me quietly like a good girl. Then, on the ride back to the Takahashi residence, after hearing my account of the arsonist incident, she said prudently, "Perhaps some leveraging of the police might be called for."

"Leveraging.....?"

Wasn't Kaburagi-san already doing that?

"How many encounters do you reckon we have had with the police from summer to autumn? Merely staying on guard against the police and bolstering our own defenses may be insufficient. We should perhaps consider going on the offensive, lest one day they push through and expose our identities."

"Go on the offensive, you say, but how do we do that? Should we assault the headquarters of the Public Security team assigned to the Super Water Sphere Incident?"

That was the very core of the Japanese government's effort at investigating espers and superpowers. True, there were also gaggles of people in mass media swarming all over the place, but they were not under a centralized command and so were of no threat to us.

But if we assault the police, won't that burn bridges for real? We would be completely locked into the development of becoming Public Enemy #1.

Let alone the police, I had the power to destroy all of Japan in one blow, and so technically turning the police into our enemy wasn't going to be much of a problem, but destroying the police was only going to cause problems. Japan would turn into a lawless land.

My answer caused Baba to look at me exasperatedly.

"Why did you leap straight to that? There isn't only a single way to attack someone. No, there are non-violent ways of doing so too. What say you we give people what they want such that, in so doing, we divert their attention? Yes, I believe it shall serve us well."

"You've been speaking in a really roundabout way for the past while. Please dumb it down for me."

"Ahh, in other words..... let us drop the police hints about espers, and divert their eyes with decoys."

Chapter 9: That Power Spot Was Actually the Real Thing!

Samurai from the Edo period had a really interesting saying:

Ghost in the distance

Expose its identity

Merely pampas grass

It basically meant that when someone thinks something is scary, even an ear of pampas grass could look like a ghost. Once humans are convinced of something, sometimes it's really hard to convince them otherwise. This is partly why the world is so filled with people who believe in ghosts and fortune telling. Furthermore, that trend was even on the uprise.

I myself was completely incapable of understanding how people could believe in something without actual proof. I had doubted even my own superpower when I awakened to it. My general policy toward everything occult was to approach it first with doubt. That way, the chance of being deceived would go down.

But with that said, after the Super Water Sphere Incident, things weren't exactly so black and white anymore. After all, we were the ones who had given proof to the rest of the world of the existence of superpowers, something that normally would be dismissed together with everything else occult.

If espers exist, then maybe ghosts and monsters from folklore do too! Maybe there are fortune tellers who're really reading the future! Unidentified Mysterious Animals may be just living in hiding, and my neighbor may actually be a wizard! Such laughable nonsense had ceased to be laughable nonsense. The line between the imaginary and the real was falling apart.

As a result, those lucky charm keepsakes sold at souvenir shops started flying off the shelves, the viewership ratings of fortune telling TV programs made a sharp turn upward, and autobiographies written by people who claim to have

met space aliens or UMAs received reprinting orders with the momentum of surging waves. It could be said that this was all inevitable.

And included within this supernatural boom were power spots.

Power spots were basically “special locations” that dotted the planet here and there. These were the so-called spiritual lands, spiritual mountains, holy sites, and holy lands that had been worshiped since the olden times. *Sounds like a bunch of baloney if you ask me.* Supposedly some spiritual aura or something would be gushing out from the ground, and by bathing in it, one could receive better luck or good health or some other blessing.

Of course, they were all lies. Power spots don’t bestow blessings. Back in my university days, I had also visited a ton of famous power spots. As could be expected, none of them had any reaction to my superpower. My luck did not go up noticeably. My tooth cavity did not get healed.

There’s no better way to bolster one’s superpower than diligent training. Someone who wants better luck would be much better served learning the techniques of a swindler. And a cavity? Go to the dentist already, dude.

This was reality. Clinging aimlessly to something that did not exist was very different from putting in the effort to realize a dream.

And with all that said, this time, we were going to take advantage of this human inability to discern between what’s real and what’s not. Each power spot already had its own stories and myths, so if I were to spam supernatural-seeming phenomenon at such locations, it was bound to gather the attention of the mass media and police alike. By cleverly interweaving the existing information about the power spot and the tailored supernatural phenomenon, a rather large bit of confusion and diversion could be expected. As an aside, it would also have the effect of raising the number of visitors to the power spots in question.

Of course, I did not expect mere decoys to cause Tokyo to become completely emptied out. However, at the very least, it should spread out those sniffing around and thin their numbers a bit.

Upon getting permission from Kaburagi-san, who was busy making arrangements for the traitor event, the strategy of using decoys to scatter the

riff raff beforehand was agreed upon. She herself was focusing on the preparations for the traitor event itself, so the decoy strategy was going to be taken up mainly by Baba and myself. As someone with experience leading an entire country, Baba was incredibly sharp. With me making up for her unfamiliarity with common knowledge here in Japan, we could manage perfectly even without Kaburagi-san. Every once in a while, talking with Baba made me feel like a layman talking to Einstein or something.

In the strategy room located within the secret base underneath Ama-no-Iwato, Baba and I had several maps spread open, with red pins indicating the power spots that we had an eye on. For our consideration of such places within Japan, naturally we singled out the most famous ones, including Mt. Osore, the Sea of Trees at the foot of Mt. Fuji, Takachiho Gorge, and Mt. Aso. In addition, we also added a few comparatively obscure places that generally would only be known by nearby residents.

Now, it would be strange for supernatural phenomena to be limited to Japan alone, so for our overseas considerations, we included Ayers Rock, the Grand Canyon, Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, the Parthenon..... and also Mt. Everest and Easter Island for good measure.

For the briefest of moments, I did consider using telekinesis to stimulate an underwater volcano to spew out enough magma to create a whole new island and manipulate public opinion into thinking of it as the newest and biggest power spot of the 21st century, but then I stopped myself. I was afraid I would drive oceanographers, geologists, and physicists all over the world absolutely mad if I did so. And of course, there was also the rather real fear that I would accidentally use a bit more strength than I was supposed to and end up pulverizing the bedrock or cause some other cataclysmic alteration to the global environment. So in short, the perfect balance would be to draw the attention of the mass media and police without it turning into a big commotion.

While she was in the middle of sticking pins on the places that I was reading out loud while searching on my smartphone, Baba suddenly started as if something had just occurred to her, then asked, "Adding to our list is well and good, but how ever are we to cover an area so expansive? I dare say travel alone would take quite a bit of time."

“Oh, did I not tell you that I can activate my telekinesis remotely, and that I can use it to pretty much mimic clairvoyance?”

“I have yet to hear the full extent of your capabilities. How far can you see with your clairvoyance?”

“For what it’s worth, I can see behind the rocks rolling around on Mars.”

Baba’s hand froze. For some reason, she looked at me with slightly creeped out eyes. *What, got something to say?*

“Allow me to set the record straight: that telekinesis of yours is sufficiently powerful to shatter the planet, can be activated from anywhere on said planet, and at any time of your choosing?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“I cry foul! You *are* a demon lord in truth.....!”

“You cut me deep, you really do.”

If I ever felt like doing it, I could indeed smash this planet into smithereens in but a few seconds. Although I understood how scary that could sound, having someone being scared of me for something I haven’t done was a bit hurtful. But with that said, if asked whether I could get along well with a dude who constantly walked around with a button that could activate a bomb capable of blowing Earth up casually shoved into his pocket, the answer would be a resounding NO. So I also kind of understood how Baba felt.

“So in truth, there is nowhere on this entire planet where one can flee to hide from your eyes and your grasp? Is that not the same as you being able to do whatever you want?”

“‘Whatever I want’ sounds a bit..... just saying, I don’t peek at girls in the bath, all right?” *Cus I had promised Kaburagi-san. I keep my promises. But as for the time before I promised, well, just a little, maybe?Oh get off my back, I’m a guy too.*

After that, we continued adding potential candidates to the list while shooting the breeze, eventually settling on a total of around forty locations all over the world, including the ones in Japan.

Although they were supposed to be decoys, we were actually going to make supernatural phenomena occur at those locations, so even those who realized that they were decoys would still be forced to look into them. This would be especially relevant to the foreign intelligence agents who had infiltrated Japan. It made perfect sense that if there was something supernatural happening in their own country, naturally they would prioritize investigating that instead of the supernatural phenomena in Japan. Even if they didn't all scatter back to their own countries and completely close up shop in Tokyo, this should still put a crack or two in their armor.

Carrying out one event as a decoy to clear the stage for the traitor event..... like, what, seriously. But well, let's do our best. Time to brute force my way through with telekinesis!



In the middle of the night on a certain day in autumn, Nanami Okishima had come to the Sea of Trees at the foot of Mt. Fuji to kill herself because of her depressingly unsuccessful foray into the job market.

Her parents had ordered her to study, so she studied reluctantly. They ordered her to practice the piano, so she practiced it reluctantly. Without any particular dream or goal in mind, she floated through high school, then university. And then she stumbled before the challenge of finding a job.

She had above average grades, which meant you could find her name faster starting from the top rather than the bottom. However, there was nothing that she particularly wanted to do. Was she to get herself hired by a random company and then just work there for the rest of her life? Even if it was a job she had no interest in? Or was she going to get married and become a housewife?

Just imagining her options left her locked in fear. Nanami had applied to take the company entrance exam at eight different companies, but every single time, she would fall sick from stress one day before the exam, and thus, she failed them all.

She had lied to her parents that she had gotten hired at a small company. Then, while living off of the savings that she had accumulated during her time at

university, she had spent the past six months searching for a job. However, those savings had run out just yesterday. Coming clean to her parents seemed as equally frightening as stepping out into the corporate world with all its terrible reputation of soul-crushing and exploitative companies.

“Yep! A piece of trash like myself really should just die off after all! Let’s go die!” Growing depressed again at the recollection, Nanami proceeded down the wildly overgrown path with a spring in her step and eyes devoid of light.

The rush of being out here at night, her depression, sheer bravado, fear of the dark and cold forest, and the effects of alcohol had all mixed together to plunge her into a rather incomprehensible mental state.

The actual name of the Sea of Trees at the foot of Mt. Fuji is Aokigahara Forest, and it is a primeval forest located northwest of Mt. Fuji. It is famous as a suicide spot. This isn’t restricted to Aokigahara alone, but the things about forests is that all the trees look the same, and so it is extremely easy to become lost. This is all the more true during nighttime, when one can lose one’s bearings from a quick turn and a momentary lapse of attention. Walk 5 minutes, and it would already be impossible to know where you were.

The Sea of Trees was hardly quiet, with insects and rustling leaves working together to raise quite the cacophony. However, that did nothing to help alleviate the eeriness of the forest in any way. Nanami walked on for a whole hour with flashlight and rope in hand, but she had not come across a single person. In exchange, she thought she had spotted what she thought to be bleached bones twice in that time.

“Oh look, doesn’t this tree look just perfect~?!” rejoiced Nanami at finally finding a tree that seemed just right to hang herself from. Her habit of talking to herself had grown worse when she started living by herself.

“Humans~ are born among humans~ but die alone under heaven and earth~ alone and aloof~ in all their vainglory~” Singing cheerfully while her eyes still remained devoid of light, Nanami tied her rope to the tree and gave it a tug to make sure that it would hold. Then she took a swig from the small bottle of alcohol that she had kept in her pocket and raised a cigarette—she had picked up the habit during her hellish days of searching for a job—to her mouth. It was

meant to be the very last puff of her life. With a shaking hand, she brought a flame up———and froze.

Nanami had noticed something that seemed to be shining a distance away. It was not starlight. Red in color and wavering unsteadily, it seemed man-made in nature. And it was drawing closer to her. She immediately pressed pause on her exciting one way trip to the next world, chucked her cigarette away and turned off her flashlight, then quickly hid behind a tree before peeking out. After all, she had come here to depart on this journey without tipping anyone off. It would be an enormous waste of all her effort if she was to be spotted and rescued.

Had she bumped into another person who had similarly come here to end their life? Or was it the police or a search party? Nanami tensed her muscles and squinted, remaining fully on guard.

As the light drew closer, it started to increase in number.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six..... more than ten..... She stopped counting after fifty.

Each light was about the size of a human head, and they were all different colors. Red, yellow, purple, green, orange, red, lime green, then red again. They were proceeding along in single file, snaking their way in between the trees.

When the lights got close enough to be seen clearly, Nanami doubted her eyes.

They were floating in midair.

They were balls of fire floating along in midair, not supported by anything and not held by anyone.

“No...way..... or maybe yes way.....?” Right after doubting her eyes, Nanami doubted her doubt. Perhaps these were hanging from a string at the tip of a long pole, like traditional Japanese lanterns. Or so she thought, but no matter how much she squinted, she couldn’t see the telltale strings. Even though it was nighttime, the balls of fire were doing a pretty good job illuminating the surrounding area. If there were strings, then those strings should be visible from reflecting all the light.

Nanami's breathing turned erratic, and a cold sweat broke out. *Those are..... could it be that those..... are the souls of the people who've died here in Aokigahara———*

"Don't make a sound."

"KYAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!"

The voice coming from behind her caused Nanami to almost jump out of her skin and scream at the top of her lungs. The surprise attack that seemed exactly like a perfectly-timed jump scare in a horror TV show sent her heart on a chain of a thousand explosions.

The person who had spoken to her turned out to be an older man, a suspicious-looking uncle. He was wearing a black full-body raincoat, and his hood was pulled so far forward that only the bottom of his face was visible. The raincoat was decorated by various weird squiggly patterns and cursive-like script. It was a getup like something that she would see on a TV program about the eccentrics who had gathered in Tokyo.

The suspicious uncle looked at Nanami exasperatedly. "Shh! I said to not make a sound! You don't want to be drawing *their* attention either, do you?"

"Wh-Who's 'they'?"

"Those *hitodama*. The human souls." While bringing an index finger to his lips in a gesture for silence, the suspicious uncle used his other hand to point to the floating balls of fire.

The slowing swaying *hitodama* had stopped their procession. The foremost one was barely 10 m away. It was so close that Nanami could smell something similar to burning gasoline coming from it.

Although it had no face, and so she wasn't sure, Nanami felt like the *hitodama* was looking at her. She was gripped by a terrible fear, as if all her insides were churning in place. Tears sprang to her eyes. Why was she in this situation? Because she tried to kill herself? If she got caught by the *hitodama*, then surely a fate even worse than death awaited her. She could feel it in her bones.

After several tens of seconds of the greatest terror that Nanami had ever experienced in her life, the *hitodama* slowly resumed moving again. Just as they

had been doing before, they continued floating and swaying their way through the night forest. The shadows cast by the light of the *hitodama* illuminating the trees fell on Nanami again and again.

Eventually, the last *hitodama* made its way past in what felt like a purposely slower pace to spite them. The suspicious uncle heaved a sigh of relief. “Phew. We’re good now.”

“*Hi...ha—ah.....*” Nanami had to struggle a bit to remember how to breathe. By repeatedly taking shallow breaths, her completely zoned out brain finally received the oxygen it was demanding and gradually resumed normal operation.

A quick glance told them that the *hitodama* were already quite a distance away now, and were showing no signs of returning.

Nanami enjoyed a brief moment of respite, but then realized that she was hardly out of danger. Who exactly was the suspicious uncle in front of her? Why was he in a place like this? What did he know about the *hitodama*? Every single thing about him seemed suspicious.

As someone whose conversations hadn’t progressed past anything more than “Don’t need a bag, thanks” to convenience store cashiers for the past few months, it took quite a bit of effort for Nanami to open her mouth to ask, “Wh- Who are you?”

“Who, me? Oh, just call me Suspicious Uncle,” replied the suspicious uncle frankly.

There wasn’t really anything for her to say in reply to a suspicious uncle introducing himself as “Suspicious Uncle.” She only knew that the instant she allowed herself to think it funny and laugh out loud, it would be her loss. But that aside... all right then, guess this suspicious uncle can just be “Suspicious Uncle.”

“Those *hitodama* are the souls of espers who’ve died. When espers die, their souls get trapped inside places with unique magnetic fields and become unable to pass on. The ones just now were pyrokinetics who had lived at the end of the Edo era. More specifically, they had died around the Keiou era, which was 1865 to 1868, if you aren’t good with history. I believe that during their time, they

would have been called ‘black arts practitioners,’ if I recall correctly.” Suspicious Uncle was just flapping his mouth, dumping exposition onto her even though she hadn’t asked. “I had read about them in an ancient text, and just thought, wow, 150 years? How can you not feel bad for them? So that’s why I’m trying to find a way to help them pass on. But it’s a bit.....” Suddenly, he paused, and jerked his chin toward Nanami. “What about you? What’re you doing here?”

“Ah, I’m Nanami Okishima. I was previously looking for a job, but I guess you could say that I’m here looking for..... enlightenment.”

“Suicide, huh. I guess that makes sense, can’t really think of any other reason why someone would be here in the middle of the night. Oh, but I’m not here for that, just saying. Want a smoke?”

Having braced herself against a whole spiel about not committing suicide, Suspicious Uncle’s light-hearted response completely caught Nanami off guard. He cheerfully proffered a cigarette, so she accepted it gratefully. She had ended up chucking away her last one when she first spotted the *hitodama*.

Immediately after lighting it up, she realized that it wasn’t a tobacco cigarette, but a chocolate one. It was a slightly pricey snack that had recently gained governmental acknowledgment as a substitute for smokers trying to kick the habit. It was indeed a snack, but it still properly emitted smoke. As Nanami enjoyed the sweet fragrance of the chocolate in smoke form, Suspicious Uncle took a puff and immediately started choking violently.

“What the hell, this thing gives off smoke?!”

“Uh, of course it does. What did you think it was?”

“Some aromatic kinda thingy? Ah screw it. It feels like breathing in smoke from a campfire that tastes like chocolate.”

“Don’t worry, everyone’s like that with their first stick. You’ll get used to it by your second or third one. And chocolate cigarettes don’t have any harmful substances inside either.”

Incidentally, chocolate cigarettes are delicious when eating it outright as a snack, if one doesn’t want to smoke it. And as a second aside, tobacco cigarettes are packed with enough harmful substances that eating just one stick

is enough to be fatal.

When Nanami finished smoking her first one, she found another being proffered to her. And just like that, despite having come here to kill herself, Nanami found herself merrily chatting with a suspicious-looking stranger in the middle of Mt. Fuji's Sea of Trees in the dead of the night.

"I'll have you know, I've been chasing *hitodama* for about 10 years already. And I can tell you for a fact that after the Super Water Sphere Incident, they've been appearing much more frequently and for longer periods of time. Like, significantly more so. I almost suspect that they may be related somehow. I've seen somewhere in the news that supernatural phenomenon have been occurring all over the world too. Have you heard of anything, Okishima-san?"

"Umm..... oh yeah, I think I saw something on social media about mystery circles appearing at the Parthenon?"

"Social media! You young people and your tech nowadays. If I remember correctly, that's something like email, right? I'm afraid I don't know too much about that sort of thing."

"Erm, social media is a bit different from email, but....." Nanami smiled wryly in response to that line that could be said only by someone who truly didn't know what they were talking about.

Suspicious Uncle said in a slightly pathetic tone of voice, "Okishima-san, can you help spread the word about the *hitodama* in Aokigahara in my stead? To be honest with you, it's been getting quite tough chasing them all by myself. I really want more people to know and come to help me search. I can even give you a little bit of compensation for your time." Even as he was speaking, he took out several ten thousand yen bills from his wallet.

Nanami was extremely flustered. The conversation had veered into a direction that she had not expected at all. "What, eh, but no, I came here to kill myself though. All the talk about compensation and work honestly just frightens me to no end."

"Hmm, so you're not afraid to die? But if you're not afraid to die, doesn't that mean there's nothing you're afraid of?"

“That’s not quite.....”

“Can you please postpone that just a little bit and help me do the social media thing? Come on, um, pretty please? I don’t have that many acquaintances, you’re the only one that I can rely on for this. See, I’m literally begging you here!”

While looking at Suspicious Uncle lowering his head in entreaty, Nanami found herself thinking, “Well, if that’s all that he’s asking.....” Perhaps the chocolate cigarettes had also helped to break her out of her depression and return to a calmer state of mind.

She had thought that she would just cease to exist when she died. She would just go *poof*, and there would be no heaven and no hell waiting for her. She had thought that it would be an escape.

But if there are those who become *hitodama* after they die.....

If there really is some sort of an afterlife.....

It might not be so bad to live on just a little longer to make her afterlife just a little better, she thought.

Nanami raised her hands in surrender. “All right, all right, I’ll do it.”

“Oho, is that so! So you’ll do it! You’d be saving a life, in more ways than one!”

Suspicious Uncle took Nanami’s hands and shook them vigorously. There may have been some sort of a hidden meaning in his words, but she chose to not pay it any mind.

After they worked out the specifics of the kind of advertising that Suspicious Uncle wanted on social media, Nanami followed behind him out of Aokigahara. He paid her an initial deposit for her work, and was just about to part with her on the promenade. However, he turned around at the last moment as if something had just occurred to him, and asked, “By the way, Okishima-san. Would you happen to be a fan of superpowers?”

“Eh? Not particularly so. Why?”

“Ahh, just asking. Well, see you then.”

“See you. Thanks, Suspicious Uncle.”

Instead of disappearing into thin air or anything else equally suspicious, Suspicious Uncle reached into a pocket to pull out an onigiri like the ones that can be bought at a convenience store. Then he just walked away normally, munching on his onigiri along the way.

Nanami saw him off, then also walked off herself. For the first time in a long time, she did not feel afraid while heading home.



For a whole week, I mass produced diversions all over the world, at times flying over to do it personally, at times manipulating from far away. I made mystery circles, enacted poltergeist commotions, floated balls of fire, caused frogs and fish to rain from the sky, enacted various incidents of cattle mutilation, and arranged fleeting glimpses of large-scale living creatures in lakes. It was truly as if the occult boom seen by the end of the previous century was back again in full force.

Some decoys paid off, while some fell completely flat.

I repeated the large creature thing in Lake Biwako for three nights in a row, but all of the eyewitnesses turned out to be the super tight-mouthed kind. There wasn't even a whisper of a rumor going around. Talk about a waste of effort and energy.

In contrast, the *hitodama* at Mt. Fuji's Sea of Trees turned out to be a homerun success. The intelligence operative that I ended up hiring there went so far as to make numerous fake accounts, and successfully stirred up a bit of a storm on social media. Eventually, she got hired by the security department at Kaneyama Tech. During the course of our back-and-forths, I learned that she had been made to learn self-defense by her parents when she was young and that she had a 2-dan in aikido. I recommended her without thinking much of it, but then Kaneyama Tech hired her on the spot without even doing an interview. Apparently they just happened to be in dire need of a woman who was both smart and could handle herself in a fight. To my relief, she settled in with them quite quickly.

When I met her in Aokigahara, she had said that she was there to kill herself,

but maybe she was just one of those “suicide scammers” who would repeatedly threaten to kill themselves despite having no intention of following through with it.

In this way, my numerous attempts at decoys all failed or succeeded to varying degrees in a very large range of outcomes. However, the sheer quantity of them did successfully throw the police and mass media into a chaotic frenzy. Kaburagi-san also did a good job taking advantage of this situation to extend her influence even further within CIA and PSIA by helping her spies to burrow in even deeper.

With this, we finally had the room to get on with the traitor event. It turned out to be a very, very long detour indeed.

Chapter 10: Who is the Traitor?

The traitor event that was going to revolve around Baba would start with the disappearance of a few PSI drives. Upon having succumbed to the demon lord's wiles and trickery, Baba would secretly pass the PSI drives and various blueprint to "an evil person" (no, not really). Internal information of Amaterasu would also get leaked (again, not really).

The students would coincidentally realize that there were PSI drives missing and then report it to Kaburagi-san, but then—oh no!—she would get the wool pulled over her eyes by smart, wily Baba. With the unreliability of the adults fanning their sense of urgency, the students would then take matters into their own hands and conduct an internal investigation of their own.

To put it simply, it was going to be a detective make-believe. The more they dug, the more clues they would find, eventually learning that the culprit was Baba acting while under the demon lord's influence. All that would be left after that would be "Return to your senses, Baba!" followed by a wake-up punch, or a detective series reveal scene with the line "The culprit is..... you!" after which Baba would return to her senses and everybody would live happily ever after.

In other words, Baba's betrayal and the spawning of World Shadows and the prolonged recession and the never ending ethnic conflicts are all entirely the fault of the demon lord. *Curse you, Demon Lord! How could you do such horrible things!*

In the end, it would still be external pressure (demon lord) that causes the internal pressure (betrayal of an ally). If it really was Baba betraying us out of her own will, then that would truly cause us to collapse from the inside out. So since we so fortuitously had a villain who would stoop so low as to manipulate people's hearts in our script, then we might as well shove all the blame onto him.

After we finalized the script of the event, then next we had to set the stage for it.

Firstly, in order to make the smuggling out of the PSI drive more believable, we needed to have a certain number of them. If we only had a few of them and all of them were to go missing, then us not noticing their disappearance would be a touch too idiotic, and overlooking the crime at the end of the event would seem far too lenient. “We have a large number of PSI drives, and sure, some of them got stolen. But because we were also partly at fault for not managing them properly, we can just let bygones be bygones” was the situation that we wanted to create.

Both Shouta-kun and Touka-chan were quite sharp. If we set the difficulty too low, then there was a risk of them realizing that this was a set-up.

Additionally, because PSI drives run on blood as fuel, we began endorsing organization members to donate blood once every three months. To make this happen, I spent two whole weeks studying up and also creating a blood collection room down in our underground base. In the room, I installed centrifuge machines, mixer machines, and industrial-grade refrigeration units. With this, we now had the capacity to centralize both the processing and storage of the blood fuel.

The cover story for the mass production of PSI drives was that it was for the members who will be joining our organization in the future, spares in the case of breakdowns, and as test products for continuing development and improvement.

I was hoping for around 100 units, but that was far too much work for Baba to accomplish alone. Therefore, the parts that were the same between all the PSI drives were going to be mass produced through machinery, and then Baba would finish them up. This was also so that Baba could focus on the unique ones that she could not entrust to the machines.

We were referring to all of the PSI drives under the same name, but depending on the fuel being used, units could differ greatly in terms of effects and efficiency. For example, the short sword that was made as Prototype #1 was specialized to use pyrokinetic fuel, which meant that it also had high heat resistance and was shaped in a way to help concentrate and direct supernatural flames toward a certain direction. If cryokinetic fuel was loaded into the short sword, it would still activate, but all the cold air would just spill everywhere. If

chronoprohiberic fuel was loaded, then apparently it would cause even the wielder to become frozen in time, just needlessly depleting the fuel. So basically, the PSI drive had to match the fuel being used.

What happened to Prototype #1 in the end was that it blew up when we tried to activate it with telekinetic fuel loaded in. Afterward, we gathered up all the dust into a can and then put it into storage for commemoration's sake.

Upon replaying the footage from a high resolution camera at super low speed, we barely managed to confirm that the PSI drive had exploded from within. The frame had been unable to withstand the ridiculously high output. *Sorry I'm too strong.*

As a side note, even after we diluted the telekinetic fuel by 100,000 times, it was still more than enough to easily blow apart a thoroughly reinforced frame. *Okay come on, Baba, don't look at me with those eyes.*

"My telekinesis is just way too strong" may sound like boasting, but I could not gloat in good faith while watching the PSI drives that Baba had poured her heart and soul into making getting blown apart into nothingness. I really had become far too strong. If Shouta-kun and Touka-chan were said to be living out a supernatural school-life story, then I was left being the only one living out a space sci-fi story where planets get blown to smithereens. The only silver lining—if it could be called that—was that even if we manage to produce 100,000 PSI drives, I would still be able to power every single one of them with no trouble whatsoever. It didn't really make me feel better knowing that, though.

One idea we had was that by optimizing healing PSI drives, maybe we could one day see the day when we could casually keep a few on our persons like recovery items in games. Another was that if we could develop a PSI drive that could mimic my telekinetic barrier well, then it could be utilized to make a contraption that could deploy a special field that would protect the surrounding area during our fights. There were as many applications as the sea was wide.

Surely a PSI drive could also be made to replace my manual (telekinetic) efforts at turning the turbine blades for the power plant that we were working with. If so, then it would help free me up for doing other things.

Lastly, I requested for the damage feedback function of the PSI drives to be

removed, at least until such a time when I was capable of defending against it. It didn't matter that the damage was only on the level of a scratch; I didn't want to get pricked again and again and again and again every time we had a World Shadow fight.

The PSI drive's feedback attack function was like a computer virus sent over the internet to crash someone's computer in that even if I protected the computer with a physical barrier, the virus would still get through. I could defend myself against a physical attack from a PSI drive, but the feedback effect would penetrate straight through. I needed specialized training.

To that end, I had Baba make me a knife-type PSI drive specialized to deal feedback damage, and used it for self-training every night at Ama-no-Iwato.

After starting it up with telekinetic fuel that had been diluted five hundred billion times, I enveloped the knife with an invisible field. Then I lifted it above my barrier..... and I stabbed my arm!

Ouch! But gotta focus on defending myself!

Stab. *Ouch!* I slowly pushed it in while trying to use telekinesis it push it back. It penetrates regardless!

Stab. *Ouch!* I visualized clenching my telekimuscle as I would any other muscle.

Stab. *Ouch! That method didn't seem to work. Should I try vibrating the barrier?*

Stab. *Ouch! Guess that's wrong too.*

In this way, I continued stabbing my arm in trial and error. Kaburagi-san, who had come to watch, averted her eyes with her face twitching.

"Sago-san, you're being scary."

"Hmm? Ahh, it's fine. I'll just have Ig heal me—*Ouch!*—heal me up later."

".....Doesn't it hurt?"

"Don't worry. It really does hurt—*Ouch!*—like it's supposed to."

As I continued talking while continuing to stab myself the entire time,

Kaburagi-san clenched her eyes shut and clapped her hands over her ears.

Is this training really that hard to look at? I might indeed die if I was abruptly stabbed with a powerful PSI drive, but a weak mass-produced piece of junk like this couldn't threaten my life even with a thousand stabs..... But I suppose that's not the issue here, is it. Someone who's repeatedly plunging a knife into his own arm and looking chill about it probably comes off as a totally deranged madman. I guess I might have gotten a bit too used to be hurt. Let's be a bit more mindful going forward.

When the assembly line at Kaneyama Tech was up and running, we immediately began to mass produce PSI drives. After some final tuning by Baba, PSI drives in the form of clubs, shields, spears, pocket watches, bracers, and so much more were packed away into their own specialized cases and then lined up in rows in the storehouse of our secret base.

By then, the year had turned, and it was already February. It was perfect timing, as Shouta-kun and Touka-chan had just finished their high school entrance exams.

It's curtains up for this traitor event!



Considering how it's said that rumors last 75 days, the attention garnered by the Super Water Sphere Incident could be said to be on the longer side. However, regardless of how it was a scoop that shook the entire world, people would naturally move on after a whole year. Only when shows on TV did special episodes talking about "One Year After the Super Water Sphere Incident" did the matter come back to people's minds.

No matter how enormous an incident is, people still have to fill their stomachs. They still have to go to work. They have to clean their house, have to go to the toilet, and have to pay taxes. Their everyday life goes on. The eccentrics and oddballs hailing from a whole rainbow of nationalities who had filled Tokyo to bursting in their search for the supernatural had become part of the norm. The police had also gotten experienced with patrolling around and mediating the troubles they caused.

People bearing conspicuous tattoos or wearing weird roots dangling from

their neck now drew only glances at best, a far cry from the days when people would stop to gawk. The unnaturalness that the Super Water Sphere Incident had brought on had ceased to be unnatural. People had adapted, taken it in.

Growing used to something means becoming dulled to it. Even the song that brought you to tears the first time you heard it would cease to touch you after a hundred, two hundred, or three hundred replays. The gradually creeping familiarity and forgetfulness from the passage of a whole year caused the sense of fear from the Super Water Sphere Incident to become diluted in people's minds.

So then what happens? The shadows of the world gain momentum, of course.

In place of the receding fear, greed began appearing on people's faces. Although they wouldn't say it out loud, thoughts like "I, too, want to feel the rush of power from blowing away an enemy like that" would begin surfacing in their minds.

However, if they did it to their actual enemies in real life, they would get arrested. Thus people would suppress their desires. And their suppressed desire for power and violence would flow into the World Shadows as a torrent of energy.

.....At least, that was how the cover story went.

And it was the duty of the secret organization Amaterasu to fight against such World Shadows. One such member of this very organization, the Buddhist-attribute girl Touka Hasumi was, on this night, yet again engaged in battle with a World Shadow.

Under the light of a full moon, Touka-chan was fighting within a forest on the grounds of a shrine that housed a minor local Shinto deity, sandwiched between towering skyscrapers of concrete. As she had received the urgent summons at night, she was wearing an extremely simple outfit composed of a tracksuit thrown over her pajamas.

Thanks to the prototype triangular-shaped telekinetic fuel PSI drive set up on the ground, there was a telekinetic barrier in place that prevented the sounds of fighting and the light of Touka-chan's flames from leaking out. Although the pure black dome would look super conspicuous during the day, it made for

quite the effective camouflage at night. It basically made for a battle ring that existed for the sake of espers and World Shadows alone.

The World Shadow that Touka-chan was fighting this time was tall and slender. Its jet-black body wiggled all over the place and, with inhuman movements, it evaded every single swing from the flaming sword that Touka-chan was brandishing, a mass of 4,000°C flames compressed into a well-defined katana shape. Every single swing that missed generated a heatwave that caused the air to become distorted, leaving sizzling furrows in the gravel ground and burning off leaves and small branches from nearby trees.

“Stop... moving!” In her frustration, Touka-chan ramped up the output of her sword to its maximum range of 3 m and swung it in a mowing attack. However, the World Shadow bent its upper body backward in evasion, before immediately snapping back upright and resuming its boxing-like movements.

The World Shadow this time was a boxer-type specialized in dodging. It was likely that this was a manifestation of the unconscious desire for violence from all the people who had been affected from watching the livestream of last night’s world championship title defense fight. *That fight was freaking on fire! It’s definitely going down in history, take my word for it.*

The boxer Shadow loosened its shoulders, lowered its stance while bringing its fists close to its chest, then charged straight in. In response, Touka-chan dispelled her sword and expelled a torrent of flames from her entire body while holding her ground.

“Avīci Hell!” A thick tornado of flames sprang up around Touka-chan. The World Shadow that dived into the tornado had its membrane burned to nothing in a split second, quickly followed by its entire body pathetically evaporating into mere water vapor.

Touka-chan retracted her flames, then stomped onto the stone core that had gotten brittle from the scorching. Only after taking a look around and confirming that there were no stragglers nearby did she finally lower her guard.

With that, the battle part was over. Possibly due to Shouta-kun’s influence, Touka-chan had also taken to shouting out the names of her techniques while using them. *Yep, she really is cute.*

Without any delay, Touka-chan smoothly shifted into kicking over the scorched and overturned gravel within the grounds, which had been heated so much that it seemed one might make the perfect roasted sweet potatoes with them. Then she took out a foldable-type PSI drive in the shape of a Buddhist monk staff called a khakkhara from her pocket and activated it. The cold air that blasted out from the khakkhara immediately cooled the area down, preventing against the possibility of a fire incident.

After taking care of all the clean-up in a clearer state of mind than she had been in when she first got here, she disabled and retrieved the telekinetic barrier contraption and turned to head home. Matching her timing perfectly, I gave a call to the Part-Time-kun that I had on standby and hung up after one ring, which was the GO sign that we had decided on.

Just as Touka-chan was about to get onto the bicycle that she had parked in front of the shrine grounds, a man came out from the shadows behind a light pole to stand in her way. He had a very flashy appearance, which included hair dyed blond and piercings in his ears. However, most likely due to the fact that he had been on standby for thirty minutes out in the cold, his lips were slightly blue, and he looked very cold. *Oops. I forgot to tell him to come wearing warm clothing.*

But thankfully, Touka-chan did not realize the tiny tell-tale signs. She simply brought her guard up, bracing herself.

Part-Time-kun seemed to lick Touka-chan's breasts and hips with his eyes while saying, "Oh, arentcha a cutie. Whatcha doin' this late at night? It's dangerous an' all, you know? Want me to escort you home?"

"I can get back just fine."

Paying no attention to Touka-chan's cold refusal, Part-Time-kun continued to press. "Hah? That's no way to act toward someone offerin' a helpin' hand an' all, yeah? Just come with me already."

"Stay away." Touka-chan made a swipe with the khakkhara that she still had in her hands in an attempt at intimidation.

Part-Time-kun took a step back, then stuck a hand inside his chest pocket irritably. *Good, good, you're doing a great job acting like a hoodlum. As*

expected of a member of a university theater group.

“Stop yer strugglin’! Whaddaya think you can do with that stupid stick... staff... eh, why do you have a staff?” However, even this great master of the theater faltered upon noticing the khakkhara that Touka-chan was holding up. He accidentally dropped his facade and reverted to his normal self in bewilderment.

Before his eyes was a girl wearing a tracksuit out at night as if she had just made a trip to the nearest convenience store. But in her hands was a silver-colored khakkhara. These two facts made for an extremely bizarre combination. *I understand how you feel, but hang in there just a little bit longer!*

“This isn’t a staff. It’s a khakkhara.”

“Oh really? So that’s what they’re called. I’ve seen them before in manga—like hell that matters! Do as I say if you don’t wanna see a world o’ hurt!” Part-Time-kun somehow managed to get back on track, reaching into his chest pocket to take out a knife PSI drive and activate it. The flames that sprang up caused Touka-chan’s eyes to widen in surprise.

There was a strict ban on the distribution of PSI drives. The only people that should be holding one were either Amaterasu members or, only very rarely, a Kaneyama Tech researcher. By no means was it something that should be in the hands of a hoodlum out at night.

Part-Time-kun made a lecherous face that looked very convincing. “How’s this? You wouldn’t want that pretty face o’ yers to get a burn on it, wouldya? Drop yer khakkhara and git over here.”

“Where did you get that?” asked Touka-chan in turn, not faltering in the least at his threat. Even though there was a burning knife pointed at her face, she was acting so confidently that it was as if she was saying, “*You’re* the one being threatened by *me*.”

It was extremely uncanny. A normal girl would be either screaming, quivering like a deer caught in headlights, or fearfully doing as he ordered. However, the willpower and aura of someone who had experienced numerous real-life battles (against World Shadows) was conversely threatening to overwhelm Part-Time-kun.

“Sh-Shut up! Listen to what I say or I’ll killya!”

“Answer me. It’s important.”

“Shut the fuck up, you bitch! Just g—*oof*?!”

Without a scrap of hesitation, Touka-chan jabbed the butt of her khakkhara into the solar plexus of the Part-Time-kun who was totally getting cold feet. As he cried out and crumpled to his knees, Touka-chan wrested the flaming knife from his hand, and examined it closely under the light of the street lamps. It was not a modified cylinder, nor was it a fancy lighter. It was a genuine, authentic PSI drive.

Touka-chan asked once again, slowly enunciating her words and taking the tone that someone would adopt against a disobedient child. “Where... did... you... get... this?”

“I-I don’t know!”

“How could you not know? You lose merit every time you lie, all right?”

“Wha—‘merit’.....?”

“Answer me. Or do you want to be turned into a *sokushinbutsu*?”

Part-Time-kun had no idea that she was referring to a Buddhist monk mummy, but he got the gist that he was being threatened with something really bad. He confessed while shivering in fear, “A w-weird guy gave it to me. He p-paid me a lot of money and told me to st-stab you with it.”

“A weird guy? What kind of person was he?”

“He—”

In the middle of his line, I called Part-Time-kun’s phone again. The two rings prompted him to leap to his feet and dash off. Touka-chan was about to chase after him, but right then, a tentacle punch flew out of nowhere in a surprise attack. She managed to sense it and evade it only in the nick of time.

“?! Why now.....!”

A normal World Shadow, the slime-like version in indeterminate form, crawled out from the gutter at the side of the road to say “hi.” Touka-chan shot

several looks between the back of the fleeing Part-Time-kun and the writhing World Shadow in indecision, but eventually turned fully toward the Shadow. Cue her second battle of the night.

Having successfully gotten away from Touka-chan, Part-Time-kun dashed into the family restaurant that we had agreed on as the rendezvous point while gasping for breath. I called out to him, fully disguised in sunglasses and a fake beard. “Over here, over here. Thanks for your help. Have this parfait, I ordered it for you. Oh, and a cup of coffee. Do you drink coffee?”

Part-Time-kun nodded, threw himself roughly into the seat across from me, then gulped down the coffee in one swig. After catching his breath, he said in a tired voice, “I did everything you asked for. I let her take that fancy lighter from me, and also made sure to hint at the existence of a mastermind. But seriously, what was up with that girl? She has a cute face but she’s freaking scary! And she was saying incomprehensible nonsense too.”

“I have no idea either. I was asked to arrange this by a friend too. He mentioned something about a movie shoot? Honestly, it sounded a bit fishy to me, but hey, what do I know, yeah?”

Part-Time-kun shivered once, during which I responded while playing innocent. When I hired him for this role, I had given him only a bland, harmless spiel, without sharing anything at all about World Shadows or Amaterasu or superpowers. This was a one-time-only part time job for this young man with great acting skills and a tight mouth. However, even though it was only a part time job, I had still taken measures to ensure his safety. Shouta-kun might be different, but Touka-chan was strictly against killing, and she could be trusted to not use more force than necessary or use her superpower thoughtlessly. Seeing as how even the jab that she delivered to Part-Time-kun’s solar plexus wouldn’t even leave a bruise, I had clearly made the right choice in terms of personnel.

For fear of saying something that I shouldn’t, I quickly moved the conversation along by passing Part-Time-kun an envelope filled with the reward that I had promised him. Fifty thousand yen, in cash, for an hour of work. Even in spite of the fishiness of the whole affair, it was still a very enticing deal. I had also included a bit more to ensure that he kept his mouth shut.

Part-Time-kun confirmed the number of bills several times while licking his lips, murmuring quietly about how he would be able to buy something pretty good with all that money. Out of curiosity, I asked him what it was that he intended to buy. *I hope it's not illegal drugs or anything of the sort.....*

“The day after tomorrow is my mom’s birthday, so I’m thinking of buying a dishwasher for her. One that also includes the drying function.”

“Well that’s very admirable of you!” I found myself slightly impressed as Part-Time-kun scratched his cheek in slight embarrassment. *What a great young man he is! There’s no need to be embarrassed about it. Throw your chest out, this is definitely something that you can be proud of! Which reminds me, I haven’t gone to visit my own parents for quite a while. At least not after I quit my previous job. Come to think of it, I haven’t even given them a call to tell them that I had found a new job. Guess maybe I’ll pop in when I have some time.*

Then the night passed, and the next day arrived. After school let out, Touka-chan rushed to Ama-no-Iwato to report on last night’s happenings to Kaburagi-san. Incidentally, Shouta-kun was at home re-dyeing his hair red after having temporarily reverted it to black for his high school interviews. Ig was in her nest box taking an afternoon nap.

“—So then I thought that maybe there’s another elf who’s come to our world and is making weapons for bad people, but then that doesn’t explain why this one is loaded with my blood. That’s why I think someone’s snuck in and robbed us.”

“I can see the logic in what you’re saying. However, the storeroom is under lock and key, and Master is always standing watch at the only entrance into the secret base, so I also find that a bit hard to imagine. But if that person really had this in his possession, then this PSI drive has been somewhere it shouldn’t have been,” agreed Kaburagi-san cautiously while inspecting the PSI drive.

“Exactly! So I was thinking, how about we all work together to revise the anti-theft measures that we have in place!”

“Hmm.....”

While frying up pancakes on the other side of the counter, I felt myself sympathizing with the misgivings expressed by Baba. Judging by the way Touka-

chan was speaking, the possibility of this being an inside job had not crossed her mind at all. She was completely under the assumption that a robber had broken in. That went to show how much she trusted the other members of Amaterasu, but I had to agree that it seemed a bit worrying. Even though this whole situation was faked, Baba was indeed acting out the part of a traitor. *Blind trust without allowing room for doubt is a very different matter than making a conscious choice to trust after having doubted, Touka-chan.*

I felt slightly bad seeing Touka-chan so innocently brainstorming anti-theft measures, but the plot wasn't going to progress at this rate. It was going to turn into a futile loop of "adopt more measures" → "doesn't work" → "adopt more measures." Therefore, while serving the two of them each a plate of pancakes topped with plenty of honey, I secretly shot Kaburagi-san a hand sign. She nodded imperceptibly, then said, "All right, I've heard what you have to say. But unfortunately, I have a really urgent matter to take care of after this. Before we move onto anything concrete, would you mind checking the storeroom for me? A quick inspection would do. Just help me make sure that there's nothing out of place."

"Sure!"

"Thanks."

And after fully enjoying every last bite of her pancake, Kaburagi-san then swiftly made her exit.

Touka-chan also ate all of her pancakes. She then said "Thank you, it was delicious," and gave me a beautiful smile while returning the plate and silverware to me, which almost succeeded in making my sour face crumble into a smile. *Is she an angel? Oh, great Buddha in your great and manifest mercy, I beseech you to forgive me for the most heinous sin of toying with the pure and innocent heart of one who has so much merit.* Then she went over to activate the wine bottle gimmick and proceeded through the entrance revealed by the retreating shelf and down into the underground secret base. Without making any detours, she beelined to the storeroom.

When the door opened, it revealed white plastic cases lined up on shelf after shelf. For the sake of convenience, all PSI drives were stored in a loaded state.

In order to combat the resulting degradation of the fuel, the storeroom itself was maintained at 0°C. While using her pyrokinesis to keep herself warm, Touka-chan began to compare the inventory list hanging on the wall against the numbers engraved onto each case. She made good progress, swiftly going through all the cases. Unfortunately, she seemed to have no intention of opening any of them up.

Although it was true that Kaburagi-san had said “a quick inspection would do,” that was by no means something to be taken at face value. Rather, it was supposed to come across as either overconfidence that there was no way we would have been robbed, or a suspicious attempt to distract Touka-chan from checking inside the cases so as to cover up the fact that some PSI drives were missing. *Touka-chan, you’re supposed to open the cases. Baba the pretend criminal wouldn’t be so stupid as to steal the briefcase when she could just take the PSI drives inside.*

However, my prayers had clearly fallen on deaf ears, as Touka-chan finished checking only the cases, consequently concluding that there was nothing out of place. She was about to head out of the storeroom, with her head tilted in puzzlement, so I had no other choice but to use telekinesis to move one of the cases, causing a faint bumping sound that could easily have been missed within the purr of the ventilation. Thankfully, Touka-chan’s sharp ears picked up on it, turning around suspiciously. She swept the room with her eyes, then got on her hands and knees to check underneath the shelves. Judging by her actions, it seemed like she thought a mouse or insect had gotten in somehow.

After looking mystified for a while, Touka-chan abruptly reached out for one of the cases, undid its lock, then casually peered inside. She turned to look away almost immediately, but then came to a start, and whirled back to take a second look.

Laying inside the case was not a PSI drive as expected, but rather, a red fish. To be more exact, it was a fish that had been painted red. The low temperature had prevented it from going bad, such that its surface was coated with a thin layer of frost.

Touka-chan stared in disbelief for several seconds, then began throwing open every single one of the cases. When she was done, it was revealed that the PSI

drives in 20 out of the 150 cases had been switched out with a red fish. Obviously, there was no way to determine which case had been tampered with by external appearance, and the weight of the fish also made it nigh impossible to determine by weight either. The only way to find out was to actually open it up, though admittedly it was dead obvious by that point.

With her face all pale, Touka-chan took out her smartphone to call Kaburagi-san. But right before she did so, she suddenly froze. After a whole minute of deep thought, she decided against calling, choosing instead to snap a few pictures before putting her phone away. Then she closed all of the cases that had been strewn about chaotically, taking great care to return each one of them to their original positions. Several deep breaths later, she exited the storeroom while putting up a calm demeanor.

Good, good. So she's finally thought of the possibility of this being an inside job. If Kaburagi-san was the culprit who'd been smuggling out the PSI drives, then calling her would indeed have been a bad move.

Upon returning to the bar level, Touka-chan quickly packed her things up and headed home without meeting my eyes even once. As a matter of course, I then followed her with my telekinetic monitoring.

Once she got home, Touka-chan immediately began combing through publicly available illustrated fish encyclopedias while comparing with the pictures on her smartphone. Rather than investigating the identity of the mole, apparently she intended to first verify the clue that had been left at the scene of the crime.

.....And so she had fallen hook, line, and sinker for the trap suggested by Kaburagi-san. If I was not in the know, even I would have thought "why fish?" and consequently gone to look it up. However, that in itself was the trap.

After two whole days of research while keeping the discovery of the fishes to herself, Touka-chan finally came to the realization that it wasn't a red fish, but a fish that had been painted red, and that the fish itself was called a "herring." Curious about why the culprit went to the trouble of painting the fish red, and also in expectation of some important clue or deep meaning in the effort, she quickly typed "red herring" in the search bar.

The instant she saw the search result, Touka-chan scrambled her hair and

hurled her mouse at the floor. “Making a joke out of me.....! I may not know who you are, but I will make sure that you get what’s coming to you!”

And thus, the enraged Touka-chan threw herself into identifying the traitor.

※ Red herring: A clue or piece of information meant to misdirect someone’s attention or affect someone to interpret the truth in an incorrect manner. A trick. Misdirection.

Chapter 11: The Scheme of Suspect X

Despite having only just begun her hunt for the traitor, Touka-chan wasted almost no time in recounting everything to Shouta-kun and pulling him in as a comrade. Thanks to that, the introduction scenario that I had planned to draw Shouta-kun into the traitor event went up in smoke.

I had originally wondered why Touka-chan didn't suspect Shouta-kun, but according to the secret conversation that I eavesdropped on between the two of them, she had determined that something as thoughtful as the "red herring" nonsense was entirely beyond him. *She thinks you're more ignorant than even Baba, Shouta-kun.* Though the fact that she wasn't entirely wrong only made things that much sadder. Shouta-kun was pretty much a genius when it came to fighting, but in regards to schemes and studying, he was extremely average. He did not know much random trivia, and he could almost never manage to utilize the little that he did know. As such, Touka-chan's decision to eliminate him from the pool of suspects right off the bat was, generally speaking, completely the right call.

If I'd had it my way, then I would have liked for her to consider the possibility that he was being instigated into doing it against his will. However, this outcome was still better than her overthinking things and getting paranoid, unable to believe anyone. The fact that she had earned the experience of thinking for herself and making a conscious decision to trust someone was already enough to get a pass in my book.

After school, before heading over to Ama-no-Iwato, the two of them met up on the roof of the school building. According to the secret conversation that I eavesdropped on, they agreed on the list of suspects being "either Shiori Kaburagi, Master, Boss, or Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan" (they had dismissed Ig for obvious reasons), and were planning on installing a small surveillance camera inside the store as their first move.

Their opponent was an adult. They wouldn't be able to win in a verbal fight,

and if the culprit was alerted to the fact that they were digging around, he or she might run away or go on a rampage, either of which could possibly develop into something beyond what they could handle. That said, eyewitness testimony alone would be too weak to corner the culprit. Therefore, the best option was to get the traitor, or whoever it was that was smuggling out PSI drives, on camera.

When I heard Shouta-kun sadly murmur, “How great would it be if it really was just a robber,” I felt my chest tighten. It was true that no matter who it turned out to be, there would still be lingering ill will. *It sure is painful to suspect a close comrade, isn’t it.*

We had security cameras in our equipment storage, but the two of them feared that borrowing from there would tip off the culprit. Therefore, they both headed home first to grab their wallets, then pooled their money together to buy a small 19,800 yen (about \$180 US) surveillance camera from a home electronics wholesale store. Only then did they make their way to Ama-no-Iwato, strolling in with nonchalant faces. At the time, only Kaburagi-san, Ig, and I were present. Baba was off at Kaneyama Tech.

Normally, as soon as she laid eyes on Kaburagi-san, Touka-chan would dash over with her figurative tail wagging furiously and burst into girls’ talk with her. However, she seemed less engaged and noticeably more distracted than usual. As for Shouta-kun, he was quite blatantly shooting glances between his school bag—where the surveillance camera was—and the entrance to the secret base.

Ohhh, they want to set it up when we’re gone. Well then, let’s read the atmosphere and come up with a random excuse to..... wait, no, I’m sure the two of them have thought something up to make Kaburagi-san and me leave the store. All right then, go on and show us what you’ve got. I was enjoying the situation so much that I had to struggle to keep a grin off my face.

Just as I was passing cherries—Ig’s latest favorite—to her position on top of my head, the entrance to Ama-no-Iwato, which was supposed to have a CLOSED sign hanging on it, suddenly opened. Two men stepped in.

One of them was a man with a large, solid build who had his salt-and-pepper hair swept back. His face bore strong resemblance to that of a bear that had

just crawled out of its cave in a foul mood. The grey suit that he was wearing was so worn out that I couldn't help but suspect that it might have seen even more years than myself.

The other man was, in sharp contrast, diminutive and skinny, and had disheveled black hair. His bucktooth and unshaven stubble gave off a very strong impression of a mouse.

I had no idea who the bear was, but the mouse rang a bell in my head. He was supposedly one of the detectives stationed at Adachi City. *Weren't the police distracted by the decoys or otherwise suppressed? Why are these two here? They don't look at all like they're here as customers.*

The two of them casually panned the store, but could not help themselves from staring several times.

There was Ig, a common marmoset clinging to the back of my head and peeking out warily with only half her face.

There was Kaburagi-san, wearing an outfit that looked like it had been accidentally taken out of a portrait of a lady from the medieval era.

There was Touka-chan, who was gleefully occupied with the Sakyamuni statue that she had just received as a present from Kaburagi-san.

And last but certainly not least, there was Shouta-kun, the hoodlum with flashy red hair sitting at a table with his legs crossed rudely while puffing away on a chocolate cigarette.

Although the interior of the bar itself looked quite common, there were too many things in this space that seemed far too uncommon. However, such eccentricity was hardly lacking in Tokyo this past year. Depending on where one went, it wasn't hard to find a gathering of even weirder individuals. The customers at Ama-no-Iwato were indeed strange, but not to a degree that would merit any special attention.

The two detectives seemed extremely astonished and bewildered, but they eventually settled their eyes on me, the person who looked the most ordinary and normal out of the lot. Then the bear one opened his mouth as representative. "Excuse me, we are—"

In mid-sentence, right as he was reaching into his chest pocket, the bear-like man suddenly froze. Similarly, so did the mouse-like one, who already had his hand inside his chest pocket, as did Shouta-kun and Touka-chan. Even the slowly turning ventilation fan had stopped dead.

“Search their chest pockets.”

“On it.” I wasn’t sure what to think, but I believed that she was working something out. She had clearly stopped time while excluding me as well. So I simply followed her instructions and used telekinesis to pull out what the two men had in their chest pockets.

What came out were plum-flavored cough drops, insect repellent, normal stationery memo pads, and their police IDs.

While reading aloud from their IDs, I sent the memo pads Kaburagi-san’s way. “The large one is Police Inspector Sakyō Kumano. The small one is Assistant Inspector Yasuo Yasui. I’ve seen Yasui several times out on the streets. He’s part of the Adachi City force.”

“Seems like they’re part of the Organized Crime Control Bureau,” added Kaburagi-san with a frown on her face while quickly flipping through the memo pads.

Why have the police come to search our place?

“Weren’t the police supposed to be properly taken care of?”

“They are. PSIA’s Super Water Sphere Incident investigative unit is a mere shell of what it once was. But this..... let me put it this way: Sago-san, back when you were a student, did you ever listen to your principal’s advice to finish your summer homework as soon as possible?”

“Nah, I always just put it off as long as I could—I see what you’re getting at. Even though the core is suppressed, it’s difficult to thoroughly control the extreme ends of an organization.”

“And the Organized Crime Control Bureau is an entirely different organization too, I might add.”

In other words, PSIA and these Organized Crime Control guys were two

different groups that had been conducting isolated investigations of their own. The saying “too many cooks spoil the broth” came to my mind, but this was one of the rare instances when it ironically paid off. Even though we had stopped PSIA, apparently there was still an investigation going on.

“Why do the police have to be so annoyingly persistent? I wish they’d just leave us alone.”

“Well, it would be a problem too if the police were too quick to give up, wouldn’t it?”

She had a point. This dogged persistence in biting at our heels in spite of Kaburagi-san’s interference and in spite of all my decoys was a great testimony to the excellence of Japan’s police force.

“So then, what’s with these guys? Are they here as part of a patrol, or have we been busted already?”

“According to their memos, it seems that they’re simply going around every suspicious-looking place one by one. Let’s convince them to turn back in a peaceful way. I’ll be restarting time, so please return everything to its previous position.”

“Roger.” I used telekinesis to return the plum-flavored cough drops and insect repellent and memo pads and police IDs to their original positions, just in time before our 44 seconds were up. Judging by how she had maintained the full 44 seconds while enabling me to move also, it was clear that Kaburagi-san had also been continuing with her own training.

As soon as time resumed, the two detectives continued their motion from before, taking out their police IDs to show us, without being none the wiser.

“—from the Organized Crime Control Bureau at the Metropolitan Police Department. I’m Kumano.”

“Same as him. And I’m Yasui.”

Uh-huh, we know. I stopped polishing my wine glass, then looked at Detective Kumano’s sour face with my own sour face. *This person’s a freaking giant. Is he above 190 cm?*

As I wordlessly made eye contact to prompt them to proceed, Detective Kumano said in a business-like tone, “Apologies for interrupting your work. What we want to ask is whether any suspicious people have—” Here, he shot a quick glimpse at the Amaterasu members. “—come to this store or not. Excuse me, are those two students?”

Having made a quick trip home before coming here, the two students had changed out of their uniforms into casual wear. However, their builds and faces were blatantly young. It was obvious that they were of an age that shouldn’t be in a bar during the day.

Touka-chan was putting up a composed front reading a sutra that she had taken out from her chest pocket, but Shouta-kun totally had a “uh-oh, I’m in trouble!” look on his face. *That face is what’s going to get you in trouble, Shouta-kun. But don’t worry. We have countermeasures in place.*

I flicked several of the bottles lined up behind the counter. The clear clink made it obvious that they were all empty. Next, in order to help me maintain my reticent character, Kaburagi-san took over to elaborate. “All that is just part of the decor. During the day, this place is a café. Only at night does it turn into a bar. Master, two original blends please.”

I nodded, then proceeded to grind coffee beans. It was an obvious attempt at making the case that we were a café.

Detective Kumano jerked his chin, at which Detective Yasui put on a serious face and straightened his necktie before heading over to the counter seats where Touka-chan and Kaburagi-san were sitting. He was blatantly self-conscious of the super pretty lady and super cute schoolgirl. I determined that Kaburagi-san would be more than capable of handling him on her own.

The actual problem was the big one. *How am I going to convince him to leave? If I answered his questions with innocuous answers, would he be satisfied and leave?*

I couldn’t tell if he was convinced by Kaburagi-san’s explanation or if he decided to put it off till later, but Detective Kumano didn’t pursue his line of questioning regarding the students. Instead, he planted his elbows on the counter and leaned forward slightly. “We are currently searching for people

related to the Super Water Sphere Incident. Namely, Time Lady, Burning Girl, and Freezing Knight.”

As this rugged-looking Detective Kumano listed out loud what sounded like character names from an American comic, he showed me three photos that depicted a group of people in black outfits. Although he was completely serious, I still couldn’t help but to find the situation slightly funny. *Guess reality’s gotten just a little bit more interesting, it seems.*

“Please take your time to think about it. Have you seen any of these three individuals, or heard anything about them at all?”

“.....” I spent several seconds pretending to rack my mind, then shook my head. Then I turned back to pour the ground up coffee beans into the syphon and poured hot water in.

“What about them? Are they regulars here?” pressed Detective Kumano without taking his eyes off of me for even a second. Well, it was true that their genders, heights, and numbers were a perfect match. Although he did not seem like someone impulsive enough to draw a conclusion based on that alone, I suppose it was only normal for him to do at least a little prodding.

Behind Detective Kumano was the scene of Detective Yasui leering while reaching out an arm around Kaburagi-san’s shoulder, only to be slapped away. *You think you are worthy of casually touching Her Ducal Highness? Know your place, peon. So what is this, is Detective Kumano playing “good cop” and Detective Yasui playing “bad cop”?*

Shaking someone up by repeatedly switching between “good” and “evil” was a tactic that I had heard about very often. Upon seeing me narrow my eyes, Detective Kumano softened his tone, “There’s no need to cover up for them. We will keep your secret and, if there is a need to, we’ll also protect you.”

Oho, there’s his first leading question. Is he thinking that I may be an ordinary civilian who’s being threatened by the mysterious esper organization? But too bad for him, we’ve already read through his memo and know that he’s just asking around indiscriminately.

“.....The two girls are regulars.” I briefly and partially replied in the affirmative. It would seem unnatural if I was to deny any of them being

regulars. Kaburagi-san's words earlier sounded very much like something that a regular would say, and it only seemed natural to include Touka-chan, considering how close to Kaburagi-san she was acting.

In contrast, Shouta-kun's flashy appearance made him seem like exactly the kind of person who would randomly get curious and wander into a shady-looking store like this. I was planning on presenting him as a first-time chance customer.

"Any reason why you have a CLOSED sign hanging on the door?"

".....The more curious customers like it that way."

In actual fact, many of the customers who came in despite of the CLOSED sign turned out to be quite interesting people. Though admittedly, a lot of them did so in a drunken state, which made them proportionally annoying as well.

That said, this detective sure is poking deeper than I'd expected. Though I guess it could be said that this was only natural, given our suspicious store with its suspicious customers. Would I be able to fully dodge all of his questions?

Just when I was about to put the two cups of dripped coffee onto plates, Ig descended from my head and grabbed the ear of one of the cups. Then she dragged it along while making her way toward the edge of the counter, where Kaburagi-san was sitting. *Helping me out is great and all, but don't you go chucking that at Kaburagi-san, all right?*

As I watched on in apprehension, Ig approached not Kaburagi-san, but Detective Yasui instead. Then she used her tail to slap the cuff of his suit to draw his attention.

But that's Kaburagi-san's cup..... sigh, what was I expecting from an animal. You are fired as a waitress, young lady.

"Chi chi chi!"

"Hey there, what's this? Are you giving it to me? What a smart little monkey you are! Good job, good—"

Seemingly moved by the little animal's cuteness, Detective Yasui reached out a hand to pet Ig. But at that exact moment, Ig used every ounce of her strength

to chuck the cup of coffee at his suit!

Oi, monkey! What have you done?! Oh wait, Detective Yasui's wearing perfume! Oh my god, Ig, did you really have to express your hatred of perfume at this very moment?!

"Chi chi chi!"

"AGH! You goddamn monkey!"

"STAND DOWN, YASU!"

Hurriedly taking off the suit that had gotten a dark, wet stain from the coffee, Detective Yasui was about to swing it to chase Ig off when Detective Kumano sharply barked at him to stop. Ig took advantage of that opening to slip off the counter and disappear into the living area behind the bar.

With the tension in the air gone thanks to the prank performed by a little animal, the two detectives decided to pull out, firmly refusing the cleaning fee that I tried to press onto them (Detective Yasui tried to take it but got stopped by Detective Kumano).

With the appearance of the police seemingly having stimulated their sense of guilt, the two students also left soon after. I suppose they were not so bold as to set up their surveillance camera right after having encountered the police.

I drove to pick Baba up in the middle of her work, and called for an emergency meeting. We needed to discuss how we were going to handle these detectives who had showed up to mess things up just when we had gotten everything all set up for the traitor event.

After making sure that the door to Ama-no-Iwato was locked properly, we sat together around a table. Ig was engrossed with a nature program on TV and thus was going to stay put for a while.

Upon hearing the situation, Baba looked very interested. "Is this the 'investigating with one's own feet' from TV? I too wished to see a real-life detective questioning with mine own eyes!"

"Please spare me, seriously. An elf-eared silver-haired loli baba with a branch in her hair would have seriously raised their suspicions. It would be troubling if

they mark us and make it difficult for us to move. When I saw their police IDs, I almost stopped breathing, all right? This is seriously bad for my heart.”

“So Sago is bad with the police, it seems. You have your almighty telekinesis and your invincible barrier and yet you are still so faint of heart? Though admittedly, it never hurts to be extra careful,” said Baba while shrugging her shoulders. She was apparently under the misconception that my barrier was completely impervious to everything except the PSI drives. However, the truth was that poison gas works just fine against me, and I couldn’t maintain the barrier while sleeping and thus I was as susceptible to being assassinated in my sleep as anybody else. I was only human too.

After Baba, it was Kaburagi-san’s turn to raise her hand. “If I apply pressure to force those two specifically to stop their investigation right now, it would only cause the opposite effect. In preparation for the worst case scenario where the store is subjected to a search, I think we should revise the gimmick for entering the secret base.”

“Like how?”

“How about voice recognition?”

I see. So we’d have to say a password out loud to open the door that leads underground? “That’s it.”

“You sure? I had also thought up a few other options, such as an electronic keypad or using a remote controller—”

“‘Open sesame’ is definitely going to be a ton of fun.”

“.....Fair enough.”

Kaburagi-san looked thoroughly convinced, and though Baba looked like she didn’t quite get it, she did not raise her voice in protest. *I bet you’ll change your attitude as soon as the real thing gets installed.* Baba’s world was supposedly very underdeveloped in regards to sub-culture, and there was bound to be a certain discrepancy between the culture of our world and hers. Consequently, she did not yet understand the charm of this trope. However, the other times when I showed her other similar tropes, her eyes lit up every time without fail, which convinced me that her sense of aesthetics was very similar to that of us

Earthlings.

Next, I suggested my plan. It was something that I had thought up on the spot, but I was quite confident about it. “How about we pull either one or both of those detectives to our side?”

“You intend to increase the numbers of our set-up team yet again? I shall not object, but..... ahh, I see. You’re referring to an external cooperator, are you not?”

“We already have the top echelons of the police under our control, so you’re thinking to control the on-site personnel as well?”

“I see..... I see. You scheme to have someone who would betray the force, slipping us their investigative information and turning a blind eye to our activities. This is a brilliant plan.”

I nodded in affirmation. It was great that the girls caught on so quickly.

The way I saw it, particularly Detective Yasui seemed like he would be easy to convince. Enough money and he would flip to our side without hesitation (personal prejudice).

At the moment, we were using rather roundabout and time-consuming methods, such as me periodically sending telekinesis over to the Metropolitan Police Department to eavesdrop on them and spy on their info, and Kaburagisan was pressuring the police upper echelons or misdirecting them or dealing with them for information. In comparison to that, things would be so much easier if we got ourselves a cooperator on the police side who would proactively bring us their information. Instead of “Don’t let them investigate Amaterasu” or “Make them look away from Amaterasu,” “Turn the person heading the investigation on Amaterasu into our ally” was the most sure-fire way to protect ourselves from being investigated.

As such, the meeting between the members of the set-up team ended with a unanimous vote on the suggestion to turn the detectives. It was decided that the traitor event was going to proceed parallel to the newly decided beguilement event.

Chapter 12: Yasu is the Culprit

One of the greatest results of Baba's months-long research of the PSI drives was that she had turned the merely decorative black boxes that we had installed onto the wind power turbines (as one of our sources of income) into real PSI drive black boxes. These box-type PSI drives that ran on telekinetic fuel only needed to be secured to a turbine, after which—lo and behold!—it would diligently continue turning 24/7 without me having to do anything. The fact that the turbine had fallen to the dark side caused the company employees to shudder with terror, after which they attempted to calm the supposedly raging God of Turbines by offering stacks of blank paid leave application forms to the shrine.

Thanks to Black Box-kun's heavy labor, more of my processing capability had become freed up to investigate the detectives. Though I did feel a little bad for the employees, I had no intention of changing my plans. *If you want a more humane working environment, then don't just pray to god, make it happen with your own hands. Be not a beggar, but a fighter. Only then shall your dreams be realized.*

So then, first order of business was the standard "house visit."

The scraggly-haired Assistant Inspector Yasuo Yasui was 31 years old, living in an apartment in a relatively posh part of the metropolitan area (monthly rent of 120,000 yen, or \$1,100 US) by himself. His garage had a super eye-catching foreign car with all the bells and whistles that was clearly worth several million yen, and he wore tailor-made suits and high-class wristwatches. On his mantle was a whole row of high-spec cameras on display.

Is being a police officer been such a profitable profession that he was able to gather so much stuff by 31 years old? Upon some research, I learned that the annual salary of an assistant inspector was roughly 8 million yen (\$73.5k US). Subtract taxes, rent, utilities like gas and electricity, phone bills, gas money, and the cost of the really nice meals that he was eating out every day, and there

should have been almost nothing left in his pocket. It was entirely beyond his means to save up to buy all the expensive stuff that he owned.

I considered the possibility of him having received a large inheritance from his parents or him having struck a jackpot from gambling. However, his parents were still alive and well, already retired and taking care of a tiny farm as a hobby. Although Detective Yasui did have a habit of visiting indecent shops where he could have pretty ladies fawn all over him, he did not gamble at all.

Then how was it that he had so much money?

As I continued monitoring him in perplexion, I finally witnessed Detective Yasui visiting a suspicious bar in the deep of night, where he sold internal information from the police to a crime syndicate in return for cash. For a brief moment, I gave him the benefit of the doubt, in the off chance that he was carrying out a highly confidential investigation of the syndicate by pretending to be building a connection with them. However, upon seeing him counting each bill one by one while licking his lips and chuckling with “*gehehe*” like some manga character, there was no longer any doubt in my mind that he was just a plain old dirtbag.

There I was, thinking to incite Detective Yasui into betraying the force, and turns out he was already doing it.

It was just terrible. In more ways than one.

Clearly I was not the only person who had thought “ah, this guy looks like he’d turn for money.” The crime syndicate had set their eyes on him ahead of me.

And there we had our corrupt police officer. There was no mistaking the fact that he was a villain who was betraying the trust of his colleagues and filling his own pockets through completely illegal means. But that said, he was someone who seemed so in character that I couldn’t bring myself to hate him too much. According to what I overheard through eavesdropping, he did not hand over information that would affect someone’s life or death, and he was crafty enough to dodge all of the crime syndicate’s attempts to fully pull him over to their side. In fact, he was also successfully gleaning some information back from the crime syndicate too.

He was a villain, but not a heinous one. He was not incapable, but not all that

capable either. In short, he was a small-time villain.

With all that said, I was slightly leery of allying with a person who would proactively look for opportunities to profit from betrayal, so I put Detective Yasui aside for a moment as I turned toward Detective Kumano next.

Detective Kumano with the large, solid build was 52 years old. He had been previously married, but his wife had died from an accident early on before giving him any children. After that, he had remained a bachelor the entire time, living by himself in a tiny, cheap apartment.

Any money that he had leftover, he donated to several struggling martial art dojos in his neighborhood to keep them afloat. Everyone worshiped him as if he was a bodhisattva.

As could be expected from his build, Detective Kumano had crazy muscles. And his backstory was equally crazy.

He hailed from a family who ran a dojo that practiced an ancient style of martial arts, and he had been steeped in training ever since young. He repeatedly left very favorable results in numerous sparring exchanges with other martial arts dojos, after which he won a kendo tournament during middle school. As if that wasn't enough, he went on to earn a 3-dan in judo, 3-dan in karate, and set a record for winning an archery tournament three years in a row. The national *taiho-jutsu* (arresting art) tournament was constantly his for the taking, and every year he joined the Tokyo marathon, constantly maintaining a position around the 500th place.

In spite of this incredible personal history—or should I say, because of this incredible personal history?—he was humble and not haughty, and he kept the majority of his mountain of trophies and honorable certificates packed away inside a closet, with only a few displayed inconspicuously around his bedroom. In addition, every day he never failed to make time for practice and training, which explained his extremely brawny body despite having passed 50.

Within the Organized Crime Control Bureau, he was a legend, and everyone looked up to him and affectionately called him “Kuma-san.” There was also a rather believable rumor that he had once pinned down a real bear with his bare hands.

With all of the above, I had myself the perfect picture of a veteran martial artist. However, on the bookshelf in his living room, I also discovered a collection of old adventure-themed novels and video tapes quietly lying in neat little rows. The lineup that was fading in color and quite worn down with re-reads were all works that depicted martial artists defeating monsters and magic users with muscles and techniques, mowing down everything before them with brute force. There were even a ton of doujinshi so old and so niche that I got no hits when I searched them up on the internet, which clearly indicated that this was something that he had been crazy about since long ago.

I smell it. I smell it so strongly. This is the smell of a romanticist who has been chasing his childhood dreams throughout his entire life.....!

Is this it?

Let alone external cooperator, how about joining Amaterasu as a full member?

We can prepare both monsters and magic users for you!

You can beat them up as much as you like!

It'll be fun! It'll definitely be a ton of fun!

Amaterasu welcomes even older dudes if they have a dream!

I've already been thinking since a while ago that we want a dignified, older gentleman!

I very much wanted to immediately shift into soliciting him, but the problem was that he was someone with a wealth of life experience and that he was a policeman who was in the middle of chasing down everyone related to the Super Water Sphere Incident. If I arranged an overly contrived encounter, there was a chance that he would see through it, and any half-hearted attempt could perhaps even cause him to come at us with handcuffs. There was absolutely zero need for a prison arc in Amaterasu's story. No thank you.

Even though I was capable of wiping out humankind, I could not read minds, nor could I read the future. Consequently, contact with Detective Kumano needed to be arranged with the utmost care. But with that said, due to the police sniffing around, our two students had been staying away from Ama-no-

Iwato the past few days. *Why is it that the mere presence of the police triggers a strange sense of guilt in everybody? And even though it's highly unlikely, it feels like everything wrong that I had done in my past is being exposed and denounced.* It was clear that until we took care of the beguilement event, it was going to be impossible to proceed with the traitor event with peace of mind. Therefore, speed was called for in equal measure to caution.

Fortunately (or unfortunately), the two detectives had apparently decided to investigate Ama-no-Iwato even further. Therefore, we would have a ton of opportunities to “bump into” them. The two of them busied themselves going around questioning people in the vicinity and monitoring our storefront from a room that they procured in one of the buildings on the other side of the street. They were rather persistent in their efforts, but by using chronoprohiberis and telekinesis, we could peek all we wanted at their investigation notes and reports to their superiors to stay up-to-date on their investigation. It was basically playing rock-paper-scissors while letting the other person go first. I loved how easy it made things.

Notably, Detective Kumano and Detective Dirtbag were not together all the time. For example, one would remain on stakeout while the other would go to buy groceries, or maybe the two of them would both go out to eat but do so in separate restaurants. As such, every once in a while, there would be windows of opportunity several minutes or several tens of minutes long where they would be isolated. The way I saw it, the simplest and most direct way to recruit them was to throw a World Shadow at them during one of those moments and see how they react.

The policeman is a species that immediately calls for support from all nearby individuals of the same species whenever they sense danger. Together with proper positioning and simplistic weapons, they seek to create situations advantageous to themselves where they can utilize numbers to overwhelm their enemies.

Rumors regarding World Shadows were all over the streets, such that even the police were aware of them to some degree, even though there had been no confirmed sightings as of yet. However, that should be enough for them to immediately identify one when it appears in front of them. What would

Detective Kumano do upon encountering a World Shadow that assaults innocents? Be it running away, keeping a distance to observe it, calling for backup, or engaging it in battle, the way he reacted would help me to gauge the degree of his yearning for the extraordinary. Personally speaking, I wanted the opportunity to applaud a showing of overflowing passion that prompted him to dive straight into battle, police procedural manual be damned.

The lineup on his shelves at home by itself was not enough to draw the conclusion that he still yearned for the extraordinary. People get less proactive and more defensive with age. Despite still wishing for the extraordinary, all the fetters of society get in the way, one's body grows weaker, and all the planning involving life after retirement occupies all of one's time. There is the path that one had trodden, and there is the guaranteed path that is visible ahead. It requires courage to deviate from that path of safety and step onto a dangerous road of uncertainties. Heroes like Baba are in the extreme minority.

In other words, there was a possibility that, despite feeling a yearning for the extraordinary, Detective Kumano would be unable to dive in when the extraordinary suddenly came knocking, choosing instead to cling to what's normal and ordinary. That was why there was a need to test him with a taste of the extraordinary in the form of a World Shadow encounter.

Having decided what to do, there was no reason to delay any further. I once again called on the services of last time's Part-Time-kun, this time paying him 10,000 yen to pretend to be a passerby who got stopped by Detective Kumano as he went around questioning people, feeding him a bogus statement of "Oh yeah, several days ago, I think I saw a strange figure in the building slated for demolition close to here." *One customer coming in for the World Shadow introduction course.*

The location that I had Part-Time-kun point toward was actually the place where Baba and Shouta-kun had made first contact. Kaburagi-san had acquired the building—of course, under a proxy name so as to ensure that her name wouldn't appear on any of the documents—and left it as is, still slated for demolition but otherwise left untouched.

As for Detective Yasui, the dirtbag of the pair, he was literally being held in his steps by Baba, who was pretending to be a lost child clinging to his legs and

wailing at the top of her lungs. In order to hide her identity, she was wearing a hat that hid her ears, and her hair had been dyed blond. As this time it was a veteran detective that we were trying to pull the wool over on, I wanted to direct the entirety of my telekinetic capacity toward the scene of the encounter, so as to be ready to deal with any unforeseen problems immediately. As such, I was completely entrusting Baba with Detective Dirtbag. When I asked her for at least 10 minutes, she confidently assured me that I would have 20. *It's times like these when it becomes obvious how helpful it is to have more hands on deck.*

As for Kaburagi-san, it was with the absolute worst of coincidences that her parents just happened to have scheduled a marriage interview for her today. In order to save face, she had no choice but to attend, and thus could not be present for our event. I was a bit concerned about her end too, but I had to focus on Detective Kumano for the moment.

One last time, I scoured the surroundings of the abandoned building with telekinesis to ensure that there weren't going to be any unrelated people getting caught up in the World Shadow attack..... and then my senses picked up on Shouta-kun.

Hold on a freaking moment. Why are you here?

However, once I gave it a bit more thought, the dots connected in my mind. Shouta-kun lived in Adachi City, and both his house and Ama-no-Iwato were in relatively close proximity to this abandoned building. This was a coincidence that I should have seen coming.

When I found him, Shouta-kun was just in the middle of stuffing a pack of chocolate cigarettes into his schoolbag, nonchalantly ambling down a narrow path illuminated by the setting sun while humming a tune under his breath. The front of his jacket uniform was undone, and he was holding his schoolbag over his shoulder in freestyle delinquent fashion. Judging by the direction that he was walking, he was most likely on his way to Ama-no-Iwato after having restocked on chocolate cigarettes from his usual snack shop. The timing couldn't have been worse. *Does Shouta-kun have a predisposition that naturally draws him toward trouble?*

Well, this is an unexpected development, but there's no cause for alarm. Let's draw him away quick and easy.

I moved one of the gutter lids behind him, causing it to make a small sound. There you go, now turn aro—OH MY GOD you're wearing headphones listening to music?! Hold on, hold on, hold on, if you keep going, you'll bump into Detective Kumano around the next corner! No really hold on uh if I don't do something they'll bump into each other—"where the hell you think you're looking, punk?"—but the event will—"I'll be late, I'll be late~☆"—shit I don't have time for this that's not it that's not it hold on CALM DOWN!

.....OK, what I need to do is to separate the two of them. If they end up meeting, things are going to get super complicated. But how... oh how about I use telekinesis to pull on their clothes but no that'd be way too blatant... oh right phone, phone, let's call Shouta-kun on the phon—NOOOOOOOOOO I DIDN'T MAKE IT! Oh screw all this!

The instant right before the two of them were about to actually bump into each other coming around the corner, both of them abruptly backstepped and took a distance as if they'd both just met their lifelong enemy. For the briefest of moments, Shouta-kun emitted a very unnatural degree of killing intent, which caused Detective Kumano in his karate stance to narrow his eyes.

"Uh, sorry, sir. 'Scuse me."

"Hold on a moment."

Shouta-kun promptly lowered his fighting pose and removed his earphones to apologize, then tried to slip past Detective Kumano. However, the detective stood to block him.

Cold sweat dripped down both Shouta-kun's and my cheek. Shouta-kun's experience fighting with World Shadows had backfired on him just now. How he had carried himself just now was definitely not something that a normal person would be capable of.

A suspicious young man found wandering around a suspicious abandoned building that'd been tied to an eyewitness account of a suspicious figure. I could almost audibly hear Detective Kumano's suspicion meter cranking all the way up to max.

“Aren’t you the young man I met in that café? I have a few questions for you.”

“Sorry sir, I’m in a hurry.” Shouta-kun tried once again to take his leave, but Detective Kumano refused to yield the way.

“What is it, sir? Have I done anything bad—”

“There’s been rumors of monsters that appear all over the place in Tokyo lately. Do you know anything about that?”

“.....Nah I don’t.”

The question that Detective Kumano asked in a monotonous voice saw a brief moment of silence before Shouta-kun finally responded. *Oh my god Shouta-kun, that pause was suspicious as hell! I’m begging you, please somehow manage to gloss things over!*

“And apparently, whenever those monsters show up, suspicious figures also show up out of nowhere.”

“.....”

That’s a bald-faced lie! There’s no such setting! Well I mean, it’s actually kind of true, but the police have absolutely no information about that. Although I could tell that Detective Kumano was just saying random things to shake Shouta-kun up, the person in question himself was already emitting a “wait, have I been busted already?!” aura. His effort at trying to maintain a straight face had caused the rest of his body to become so stiff that it quivered with every utterance from Detective Kumano. That rendered all the effort concentrated on his face absolutely moot. However, he was being threatened by a policeman who looked like a bear. I could not blame him at all.

But with that said, please hang in there just a little bit more. If I used telekinesis to interfere, then it would set up the fact of “I got interrupted in the middle of my questioning,” which would only serve to deepen the detective’s suspicion.

“That suspicious figure..... has been reported to be a young man with red hair.”

“.....Well, red hair is a pretty common sight in Tokyo nowadays, isn’t it?

There's also purple and green and even rainbow-colored hair. The other day, I saw a middle-aged lady walking around town with her hair done up like the Golden Pavilion—”

Shouta-kun tried his best to divert the conversation while keeping his eyes averted, but Detective Kumano forced him to look at himself, then peered down into his face from his towering height. “You are hiding something important, aren't you? I can tell by looking at your eyes.”

“!” The blood drained from Shouta-kun's face. Despite this also being a lie, Shouta-kun had clearly believed it. Although the two of them had bumped into each other by pure coincidence, Detective Kumano was making it seem like he had been purposely looking for Shouta-kun after already having figured everything out. Shouta-kun was completely falling into Detective Kumano's trap.

In truth, the skill to discern whether someone is lying or not by looking into their eyes is something that exists only in fiction. According to an experiment conducted in 2005 where several hundred veteran FBI agents were asked to discern whether someone was lying or not by looking only at their eyes, the average correct percentage came out to somewhere between 49~50%. In other words, this so-called “skill” is just pure guesswork. In addition, all those myths regarding how someone's pupil moves or how they blink or the number of times they breathe are just that: myths. It's sad, but that's the plain old truth. All of those “techniques to tell when someone is lying” are just nonsense logic that “capable” detectives and investigators read from the works of their favorite mystery authors and are incorrectly propagating.

Consequently, the instant Detective Kumano said “I can tell by looking at your eyes,” he was pretty much admitting out loud that he was just shooting in the dark. However, Shouta-kun did not have an interest in trivia or in mystery novels, and thus had no way of knowing. He didn't know, so he couldn't tell. And that's how he got fooled.

But don't freak out just yet, Shouta-kun. You're still technically in the clear. Just play dumb. Even just clamming up would be fine. Detective Kumano has no evidence, and he didn't catch you actually doing anything. As long as you don't admit it yourself, Kaburagi-san and I can do something about it later—

“I’ve done my research, I’ll have you know. I already know that you’re Freezing Knight.”

“.....How did you figure it out?”

AH! HE WENT AND ADMITTED TO IT!

Folding in the face of Detective Kumano’s sure-sounding declaration, Shouta-kun ended up affirming what had actually been a mere guess. *Who’d thought that Amaterasu’s secret would be exposed so easily? Or should I actually be praising Detective Kumano for his skills right now? If he hadn’t been a policeman but a normal person who didn’t know anything, then I could have just telekinetically knocked him out or taken some other forceful method to keep our secret. Not that there’s any point in me thinking about “what-if”s at this moment in time, though.*

In any case, what the hell am I supposed to do about this?! I have no idea. I’m so done. I haven’t the faintest idea how to proceed. Should I contact Kaburagi-san to ask for her advice? But she’s in the middle of a marriage interview. If I interrupt and make her leave her seat, then worst case, I could be ruining the entire rest of her life.

“That’s confidential. But don’t worry, all I want is to ask you a few questions. You won’t be hurt in any way. Come on, let me give you a lift to the police station.”

“.....Sigh. All right, all right. I’ll only tell you as much as I can though. Who knows if you’ll even believe me about the World Shadows. But before I go with you, let me have one last smoke.”

Wait, what? Hold on, don’t you remember Kaburagi-san telling you to contact us if this sort of thing ever happens? You just got scolded about this after Baba’s incident!

“You sure have guts trying to smoke in front of a police officer. I’m confiscating this.”

“The fuck?! What the hell do you think you’re doing! Give that back, you thief!”

“Both drinking and smoking are for after you turn 20.”

After I had said “rest assured, I’ll inveigle Detective Kumano with no issues whatsoever!” with so much confidence, it was *suuuuper* hard to go running back to Kaburagi-san for help. However, this was no time to baby my pride.

“I’m not actually smoking, it’s a freaking chocolate cigarette dude!”

“Everyone knows that cigarettes contain tobacco. No can do.”

“It’s a freaking snack, you moron!”

“As if there’s anyone who would set fire to a snack and puff on it. Don’t think you can pull one over on me.”

Arg, what am I dawdling for? Calm down. Precious time is being wasted while I hesitate. Let’s call Kaburagi-san already.

“Give me that lighter of yours also.”

“The fuck man?! You want to take my fire away too?!”

“When you hold a lighter, you’ll feel the urge to smoke. But since you aren’t going to be smoking, you won’t be needing that lighter. You might be really mad at a random stranger getting on your case about this, but smoking really is very harmful to your health, especially when you’re so young.”

“Whoa, hold on, dude, stop, give that back! Fuck! I SAID GIVE IT BACK!!!”

Even as the phone was ringing in my ear, with me anxiously praying for Kaburagi-san to pick up, I watched Detective Kumano pluck the lighter from Shouta-kun’s hand. That was clearly the last straw for him, as he snapped and unleashed a fist clad in cold air toward Detective Kumano’s stomach. However, the detective dodged it by shifting away his upper body. The two of them glared at each other..... and then plunged into a serious fight.

The only thing I could do was to watch on in dumbfounded shock. *No, guys, stop, just hold on a moment..... Oh god, how did things turn out this way.....*

I wanted to throw up.

At the same time, I was incredibly thankful that Shouta-kun still had the presence of mind to not use his superpower at full output. If he did so, he could have turned Detective Kumano into an ice popsicle in a split instant. However, doing so would have been the same as killing him. Instead, Shouta-kun simply

enveloped his entire body in a white mist of cold air, throwing punches and kicks with the intent of knocking Detective Kumano out. The detective, for his part, managed to calmly block or deflect every single attack. However, the cold air emitting from Shouta-kun must have been quite chilling indeed, as it took only a few parries before Detective Kumano backed off warily while clenching and unclenching his fists in an attempt to combat his slowing blood flow. Then, just as Shouta-kun charged at him again, Detective Kumano took off his suit jacket and threw it at Shouta-kun's face, which caused the latter to lose sight of him for the briefest of moments.

“—and they're literally in the middle of a fight right now. Neither are using knives or guns. It doesn't feel like they're trying to kill the oth—uwah Detective Kumano's torn off a piece of the drain spout and is swinging it around! That's property damage!”

“All right, I understand the situation now. Sago-san, have a World Shadow attack the both of them.”

“Eh? You sure about that? Won't the timing seem too suspicious for a World Shadow to interrupt them right now?” *That would be like as if it had showed up to help Shouta-kun. Or wait, I can just have it attack Shouta-kun, and it should be fine? I probably don't have to worry about Detective Kumano mistaking it as an ally, but wouldn't doing this still cause him to get suspicious about why a World Shadow would choose to attack him with that exact timing.....?*

“At this rate, Shouta-kun might get arrested for assault, which would be a hundred times more problematic to deal with. I think we're going to have to give up any hopes of perfectly covering this up, which means moving onto the second-best outcome. Even if it might seem slightly forced, the top priority right now is to get through this situation. Afterward, we can cover it up all we want.”

“Didn't you say that Kuma-san's bureau wasn't under your control yet?”

“And that's why we're going to have to resort to rather forceful measures. Worst case, I might have to arrange for Detective Kumano's abrupt dismissal from the force.”

“Uwah..... so scary.....”

“But that's only the worst case scenario. I don't particularly enjoy destroying

someone's life either."

"All right, I'll leave that part to you then. Oh, Shouta-kun just lost."

Detective Kumano had managed to circle around to Shouta-kun's back, seemingly fully resigned to taking frost damage from his positioning. Pressing his body close, he had a firm grip on Shouta-kun's collar and, with the application of centrifugal force, managed to lock Shouta-kun into a stranglehold until he lost consciousness.

Kuma-san is freaking strong! He had managed to win against an esper who had numerous battles under his belt—even if the latter had been holding back—with the help of a drain spout and a suit jacket alone. His many, many years of training his body and techniques were not for nothing indeed. But with that said, he had not gotten off entirely unscathed either. His face was pale and he was shivering quite noticeably while blowing on his reddened hands in an effort to warm them up. There was even a thin layer of white frost on his hair.

To the very end, Detective Kumano had never called for backup. Even though Shouta-kun was in an enraged state after his fire had been seized, escaping from him shouldn't have been too difficult for Detective Kumano. However, he still chose to do this alone. Was it that he just didn't want to raise a commotion? Or did everything that happened take him so much by surprise that it had slipped his mind? *Don't tell me that he thought he could take him on alone?* Perhaps he had been too excited at the opportunity to take out an esper with his bare hands like the protagonists of his beloved books did.

Well, whatever it was, I had to throw a World Shadow at him before he got around to snapping handcuffs onto the currently unconscious Shouta-kun.

Honestly, it didn't matter so much that Shouta-kun had lost against Detective Kumano. The most important point was to get through this incident and then bury it. The time that Baba was buying for us was also going to run out soon. *Let's move this show on.*

With the sound of falling water, a World Shadow fell down from the roof of the abandoned building, forming an eerie-looking black puddle on the asphalt. Detective Kumano, who had been just about to snap handcuffs onto Shouta-kun, turned around and widened his eyes at the sight of the black puddle

squirming in a bizarre manner.

“What is it now.....?”

While warily keeping his eyes on the World Shadow, Detective Kumano hoisted Shouta-kun up and backed away with him. Even as he was watching, the black puddle stretched upward, gradually growing a head, then arms, then legs, until eventually taking on a smooth-looking humanoid form.

“Are you Time Lady? Burning Girl? Or could it be, Invisible Titan?No hold on, you..... you’re one of the rumored.....” Detective Kumano started off mistaking it for one of Shouta-kun’s allies come to save him, but I turned one of the World Shadow’s arms into a vicious-looking jaw like that of an alligator’s to make it easy to understand that it was an enemy. Detective Kumano caught on quickly. Then, after shuddering once, he took on a fighting stance while protecting Shouta-kun behind him.

“You’re a World Shadow.....!”



“WEREISMYMOMMYYYY?!?!?!?”

“There, there, you must be feeling lonely, right? I’ll help you look for your mom or your brother, so can you tell me your name first?”

“MOOOMMMYYYYY!!!”

The little girl who was clinging to his leg tightly and crying so loudly that he feared she might rip her vocal cords had Yasuo Yasui thoroughly confounded. He wanted very much to just kick her off and get away, but as a policeman, doing so could cause him a lot of grief later on. Although the road that they were on had very sparse foot traffic, it wasn’t entirely empty either. He made his way to the side of the street, and flashed a forced smile toward the salaryman walking by who was looking his way suspiciously.



His partner, Detective Kumano, had just gone off to do his own thing. *I ain't a goddamn nursery teacher*, swore Yasui internally while taking out a piece of candy to give to the little girl. "All right, all right. What about some candy, do you want some candy? Here, you can eat this and be qu—"

"IDUNWANTITUWAHHHH!!!"

The little girl chucked the piece of candy away with all her strength while shaking her head furiously in an expression of defiance. He was getting nowhere at all.

He had been checkmated already the instant he laid eyes on this little girl stumbling around uneasily, looking on the verge of tears. With Detective Kumano looking on, ignoring the girl was not an option. And so he had called out to her. Thus ensued all the clinging and crying that seemed to have no end. Detective Kumano had said, "If I'm around, I'll just frighten her even more" and then he had went off ahead. Although what he said was entirely true, Yasui still felt slightly bitter about having to deal with this all by himself.

There was nothing that he could do if the little girl was going to just cry and not say anything. Quickly giving up on trying to resolve this situation by himself, Yasui was just about to radio for a female police officer when the little girl abruptly stopped crying and grabbed his arm with a firm grip.

Surprised, Yasui looked at her. Then he was surprised once more upon seeing the uncanny calmness unbefitting of a little girl on her face. Her steady, wide-open eyes caused a chill to run down his spine.

"For at least the next ten minutes, *both of us* are free from surveillance. Yasuo Yasui, how would you like to make a deal with me?"

Chapter 13: “Flow, My Tears,” Said the Detective

While protecting the unconscious Shouta-kun, Detective Kumano engaged the World Shadow in battle. However, he couldn't quite manage to deal any significant damage. Or more specifically, I didn't let the World Shadow receive any significant damage.

With a beast-like roar, Detective Kumano slammed the heel of his palm onto the World Shadow, but it had no effect. After a quick spasm, the World Shadow continued bringing its alligator jaw-like arm to bear, trying to rip into Detective Kumano's throat (just pretending, of course). He managed to dodge it by the skin of his teeth, and even countered with a perfectly timed head butt. However, that too had no effect.

Judging by the tactile feedback, it seemed like he was using internal damaging force, the kind meant to destroy an opponent's organs on the inside. But unfortunately for him, World Shadows had no organs.

The first few attacks that he used were normal ones. Then he switched to unnaturally sharp foot chops and hand chops. When that also proved ineffective, he tried to restrain it with his belt and his suit jacket. It slipped through his holds again and again, so then he moved onto surface damaging force, until eventually, he began trying internal damaging force. The way he kept on changing his attacks in an attempt to find what's effective without backing down in the face of an unknown enemy spoke volumes about his wealth of experience as a veteran martial artist. If the World Shadow was a real person, it would have lost more than 30 times already. *Kuma-san's so freaking strong.*

Upon confirming that internal damaging force was also ineffective, Detective Kumano then moved onto using spear hand thrusts to pierce holes into the World Shadow. Around that time, Shouta-kun finally woke up, thanks to me repeatedly tugging on his sleeves and patting his cheeks with telekinesis.

You're so slow, Shouta-kun! We've all been waiting for you to wake up! We're

running out of time, hurry up and fight together with Detective Kumano so that camaraderie can (artificially) blossom between you two!

The instant that the just-awakened Shouta-kun laid eyes on the World Shadow, he leapt up and, without hesitation, dashed out in front of Detective Kumano and slammed an Eternal Force Blizzard into the World Shadow. *You really do like your sure-kill first strikes, don't you. Though understandably, most enemies die from that, so that's the right call, honestly.*

However, the fight this time was supposed to be one that would artificially cultivate a bond that crosses generations and statuses, one of those forged through fighting together on the same side. Consequently, the World Shadow could not go down so quickly.

And so, there you go. Have a split copy.

I used telekinesis to shatter the World Shadow that had been frozen stiff, then reconstructed it as two World Shadows. They then proceeded to engage Shouta-kun and Detective Kumano one-on-one.

“Oi, there's now two of them?!”

“Shit! Normally that'd be enough to take care of it! The fact that it didn't work can only mean that it's already eaten someone! It's a superior mutation!”

Upon being attacked by the two World Shadows in a pincer attack, Shouta-kun and Detective Kumano naturally ended up standing back-to-back, before rushing to meet their respective opponent. Shouta-kun quickly beelined to his schoolbag and kicked it up so that he could snatch out a bottle of water and spray its contents out to make an ice spear with.

Detective Kumano unleashed a roundhouse kick that smashed into his World Shadow with enough force and sharpness to put an axe to shame, then glared at it while asking out loud, “How do we defeat these guys? Do only superpowers work on them?”

“There's a core somewhere in their body. The skin is barely translucent enough that you should be able to see it if you strain your eyes.”

“.....I see it!”

“All you have to do is crush that core! It doesn’t matter what you use! Just like this!” So saying, Shouta-kun froze the bottom half of his World Shadow and then jabbed his spear into its head, accurately piercing its core. At that moment, the World Shadow that Detective Kumano was facing backed up, then shivered.

And then, uh-oh, what is this?

The World Shadow that Shouta-kun had supposedly defeated regenerated its core, got back up, then started to move again! Then the two World Shadows took on the same pose in a mirror image of each other.

Detective Kumano asked in bewilderment, “Er, like what? It regenerated itself, didn’t it?”

“Wha—that’s impossible! Is this one immortal?!”

Now that’s impossible. It is not immortal, but I’ve already given you guys hints. The splitting. The strange movements before regenerating. The same poses. Come on! This is a gimmick that appears really often in computer games and battle manga! Just think about it calmly, I’m sure it’ll come to mind!

“The strange movements shown by this one before yours regenerated must mean that this is the main body. Hmph!” Detective Kumano’s front kick accurately crushed the core in the World Shadow that he was facing.

Immediately, the one that Shouta-kun was facing backed up, then shivered.

And then, uh-oh, what is this?

The World Shadow that Detective Kumano had supposedly defeated regenerated its core, got back up, then started to move again! Then the two World Shadows took on the same pose in a mirror image of each other.

Sorry, it’s back to square one for the both of you. Detective Kumano, that was the wrong answer.

After having seen the second World Shadow do the exact same pre-regeneration motion, Shouta-kun flash-freezed his World Shadow’s alligator jaw arm and used the butt of his spear to shatter it while shouting, “I got it! We have to defeat the two of them at the same time!”

Bingo, Shouta-kun. There are two enemies. There are two of you. So the rest should be quite self-obvious, yes?

“Old man, match my timing!”

“Don’t you mess it up either! Let’s count to three!”

On one side was a young esper wielding an ice spear. On the other side was an aged martial artist brandishing his bare fists. Even though the two of them were different in every aspect, they understood each other without the need for too many words. Standing back-to-back, the two of them lowered their stances at the same instant, with their breathing in perfect sync. Even though this was a sight that I had expected, a sight that was of my own design, it still made my chest swell with emotion.

Isn’t this kind of scene just the best?

“One.”

“Two.”

““Three!””

World Shadows and humans leapt at each other. At the exact same time, Detective Kumano’s fist and Shouta-kun’s supernatural ice spear pulverized the core of their respective opponents. The World Shadows splattered all over, having been reverted to mere water and tiny stone fragments. Detective Kumano and Shouta-kun kept their guard up, vigilantly confirming that there was no more regenerating or a third new enemy before finally relaxing.

“So these monsters were made of water. Are these World Shadows related to the Super Water Spheres in any way?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Oh, and getting back to the previous topic, give me back my chocolate cigarettes and lighter. I’ll say this again, but they’re just snacks. Take a close look at the ingredient list.”

“.....Well, I’ll be. What a misleading package this is. Here you go. Sorry about that.”

After the shared experience of supporting each other and fighting together, a sense of camaraderie had indeed blossomed between the two of them, exactly

according to plan. The two of them talked it out and, based on Shouta-kun's suggestion, started heading for Ama-no-Iwato instead of the police station.

Thankfully, the worst case scenario had been averted. However, what with all the different developments, the whole scene had lasted longer than 20 minutes. Although Detective Yasui never did barge in, I was curious what had become of him. So I sent my telekinesis over his way, just in time to see Baba stop her pretend crying, look into the distance and cry "It's Mommy!!!" and happily dash off. Detective Yasui let her go, looking at her receding figure with an exhausted sigh escaping his lips.

Clearly, everything had gone according to plan on this side. Baba had very sharp hearing, so she must have read the situation by listening for the sounds of battle and footsteps and voices.

Kaburagi-san said that she would cut short her marriage interview and return to Ama-no-Iwato to take on the role of explaining everything to Detective Kumano, but I turned her down. This time, I had already interrupted the marriage interview to ask for her help in preventing Shouta-kun from getting arrested. Even though she reassured me that it was fine because she had no intention of saying "yes" to this marriage partner from the very start, I did not want to be overly reliant on her good will. Of course, if she ever felt like publicly announcing her availability, there would surely be a whole tsunami of suitors rushing to her doorstep. As such, it would be easy to feel like letting one or two interviews go wouldn't be such a big deal. However, was that truly the case? What if the partner from that first or second interview was supposed to be her fated one? What if she put marriage on the back burner, thinking that she could get to it whenever she wanted, and end up exceeding her marriageable age while being occupied with the secret organization?

The Fifth Precept of Amaterasu, "Members are to live both an ordinary and an extraordinary life!" must not be forgotten. What value is there in an extraordinary life gained by abandoning one's ordinary life? When one becomes too steeped in the extraordinary and gets overly familiar with it, then that extraordinary would eventually become the new ordinary. For that reason, it was codified as one of our sacred precepts. It was undeniable that playing at the secret organization was unimaginably fun. However, sacrificing the ordinary

for its sake would be a terrible mistake. Having made Kaburagi-san get up from her interview was already bad enough. Letting her completely blow it off would be the worst possible thing to do.

When I explained everything that I was thinking, Kaburagi-san expressed her understanding. She then promised me that she would apologize to her interview partner for the interruption and turn down this offer through the proper channels so as to not cause her parents—who had arranged for this interview—or this partner to lose face.

Mhmm. That's good then. And I might as well take this opportunity to deepen my own relationship with the wonderfully stoic and refined Kuma-san. Honestly, I was feeling a bit lonely due to my reticent character preventing me from getting particularly close with our current members.

After a short wait, Shouta-kun eventually reached Ama-no-Iwato with Detective Kumano in tow. Upon Shouta-kun's request, I had Ig use her healing superpower to heal Detective Kumano's frostbite and bruises. Then Shouta-kun frankly shared everything he knew about the World Shadows and Amaterasu with Detective Kumano, after which he exchanged contact info with him and then headed home to make it in time for dinner. Ig looked like she wanted to play with him more, so she went with him to spend the night at his place.

Left alone by himself, Detective Kumano grabbed one of the counter seats in a pensive mood. He shot a quick look at our wall clock, then quietly said, "Bowmore, on the rocks."

It was already nighttime. In other words, the time for adults.

I nodded wordlessly, then rotated the display behind me with all the empty bottles. The other side indeed looked the same, but all the bottles here were filled. Again, I had bought the metal fixtures and wood panels from the hardware store and built this myself in another proud display of my weekend carpenter skills. As Detective Kumano looked on with an eyebrow raised in half-amusement, I proceeded to make the cup of whisky on the rocks that he had ordered.

First, I took out a chunk of ice made in our ice machine. Then I took out our dedicated ice ball press (a mold made of metal that presses ice into a sphere)

and used it in front of Detective Kumano. He grunted in surprise at the sight of the chunk of ice rapidly being pressed into a sphere by the metal parts. *Smirk.*

Whenever Kaburagi-san came to the bar as a customer, she generally only ever ordered wine. As a result, this ice ball press that had set us back 128,000 yen (\$1,200 US) had yet to have its time in the spotlight. But tonight, it was finally being sortied for the first time. I was aware that I was still too young and lacking in an air of dignity to be a proper bar master. That was why I had to rely on performances using little gimmicks and tools like this to make up for it.

The picture of Detective Kumano swirling a sip of whisky in his mouth while staring into the ice in his glass was just the ultimate depiction of manly refinement. I felt like I totally lost out in a comparison of presence. *How about you be the master instead? Then everything would be perfect.*

“Takahashi-kun had gone easy on me,” murmured Detective Kumano suddenly. “That attack of his that froze the World Shadow in a split second. If he had used that on me at the very start, then I would have lost. He had gone easy on me so that he wouldn’t accidentally kill me.”

In lieu of backchanneling, I turned to flip the switch on our record player. I put a record inside, then dropped the needle. Moody jazz music filled the store.

“Didn’t Takahashi-kun say that it had only been a year and a half since he awakened to his superpower? When counting from when he had his first battle, that time is even shorter. Do you understand my feelings, Master? My 40 years of diligence had lost against his one and a half years..... vodka martini, shaken, not stirred.”

After having emptied his glass, Detective Kumano ordered his second drink. While I was preparing the glass and the ice for it, he candidly expressed his outrage while continuing, “You see, I hate cheaters. It had been my dream, ever since I was a boy, to pound people using shady powers, be it magic or superpowers, into the ground with my bare fists. I had something that I wanted to prove. I really wanted to prove that we humans could come out on top with our own strength. And yet, what is this? Even though he is a ball of talent, I had in essence lost to a child who had trained for less than a year and a half, and then also lost to one of those so-called World Shadows. What was the meaning

behind all my blood and sweat and tears? They're just too unfair. Superpowers are just far too unfair."

Possibly due to the alcohol beginning to make its way to his head, Detective Kumano stopped mincing his words, poking exactly where it hurt most. *If you put it that way, there's really nothing I can say in rebuttal, man.* Although I myself had spent 11 years training up my telekinesis, a normal person who dedicates every moment of his entire life to training would still never gain enough strength to destroy stars and planets. This disparity must seem even more unreasonable for martial artists who had indeed spent decades of their life honing their body and skills like Detective Kumano himself had.

Detective Kumano quickly drained his cocktail. Apparently he was in the mood to drink himself into oblivion at the moment. *Well, everyone has days like that every once in a while. Allow me to stick with you to the very end tonight.*

"However, he's using that unfair power of his to protect ordinary people from the World Shadows. Are you not going to give him credit for that?"

"I know that without you having to tell me!" roared Detective Kumano, as if telling me to not interrupt him. As I froze while looking at him in dumbfounded surprise, he practically snatched the next glass from my hand and downed its contents in one swig. By this point, his face was already red. It was clear that consuming so many drinks with such high alcohol content back-to-back was beginning to get to him.

"Even us police! We are protecting the peace in Japan! We give it our all again and again and again and again, every fricking single day! Nothing as glorious as fighting against enemies of the world, oh no. We can only rely on numbers, and we go around questioning people one by one while enduring the cold, staying up entire nights on stakeouts, running about all over town only to get a tiny clue or a gem of information if we're lucky. Whenever we get to move, it's always after tragedy has struck. The victims wail at us, telling us that we're too slow or that we're too late, but this is the only way we can do things! If you want to blame something, blame the fact that Japan is a country where the rule of law prevails, how about that! But even so, we still plow on. We still do our jobs, because someone's got to do it. That's why I'm a policeman. I.....we have to do it."

I found myself overwhelmed by those words spewed like a fountain of blood. Those words had the weightiness of someone who had truly been protecting the peace, a weightiness that I and my inability to step out of the realm of playing make-believe would never be able to attain.

“Sure, Amaterasu might be protecting the people from the World Shadows. That’s a wonderful thing. A secret organization of a small group of elites fighting against monsters in secret? Shit, that’s goddamn cool! But you know, we’ve been protecting the peace all the way back. We’ve been protecting it the entire time! You hear me? You get me? You understand the difference?

Let us police do it.

Let me do it.

That’s what we police are for.

That’s why I joined the police force!

Goddammit, why’s a police officer being saved by a child. Why am I so powerless at the most crucial moments. I’m a police officer. I’m a protector of the peace..... goddammit.....”

Detective Kumano stared into his glass, muttering incoherently under his breath. In sharp contrast to his outburst, he had abruptly gone quiet, and was now emitting a strong aura of pathos. My heart hurt just watching him.

“Here, drink up. Tonight is on the house.”

This place was a bar. And a bar was one of the places to go to mend a wounded heart. I served him a cocktail with a much lower alcohol content and a smoother taste. Detective Kumano accepted it with a shaking hand, then began sipping at it a little at a time. Apparently he had calmed down a bit after getting all that off his chest first.

“Master, would you listen to what I have to say? Please listen to what I have to say.”

“Mmm, I’ll listen to it all.”

After that, I stayed up through the night accompanying Detective Kumano as he spat out breath that smelled strongly of alcohol together with the bitterness

and the agony that had been accumulating over the years.

It was a truly blissful time where I got to truly act out the image that I had of what a bar master was like.



“Speaking of which.....”

Several days after the marriage interview, Kaburagi had called Baba-Nyan to her house. While showing off the chuuni theses that she had accumulated over the years, she also took this opportunity to question Baba-Nyan about the magic system in her world. On the antique table that the two of them were sitting around were piles and piles of documents and whiteboards filled corner to corner. Baba-Nyan was happily sipping on the orange juice and fruit punch that Kaburagi had served her.

By this point, the two of them had already finished their discussion regarding the rise in prominence of the Weapons That Can Kill Demon Lords for Sure (the name from Baba-Nyan’s homeworld for the platinum weapons) and had already moved onto the beginning of the decline of the demon lords. Suddenly, Baba tilted her head and asked, “.....Is Sago’s barrier impervious to all?”

“.....Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason, I am asking only out of sheer curiosity. In terms of attack power and range, he far surpasses the demon lords in my world. Thus the thought arose in my mind, ‘what of his defense?’” asked Baba-Nyan while shoving away the shiratama bits and jelly pieces in her fruit punch, eating a mouthful of only the fruits and cupping her cheeks in bliss.

“Well.....”

The flow of the conversation was completely natural, and Baba-Nyan’s attitude seemed completely open and innocent. However, a small alarm went off in one of the corners of Kaburagi’s mind.

Kaburagi had not been present during that time when Sago confessed to Baba about the setup, when she snapped, and when the two of them came to an understanding. She had only heard about it afterward. Due to that, a tiny seed of doubt had actually remained in her mind. She wondered if it was really so

easy to move on from the anger and bitterness that follows from a dream several hundred years in the making being trampled and denied outright.

Kaburagi had faith in Sago's eye for people, considering how he had found herself and also the outstanding talent that Shouta-kun had proved to be. The fact that he was placing his trust in Baba-Nyan surely meant that she was truly worthy of it.

However, the seed of doubt was buried deep within Kaburagi, and it whispered to her. No matter the person, everyone was liable to misunderstandings and mistakes. This seed made it impossible for her to deny outright the possibility that Baba-Nyan was actually still harboring a deep hatred of Sago, and that she was probing around in search of a way to kill Sago with a guaranteed method.

The appearance of Baba-Nyan enjoying only the fruit bits from the fruit punch, seemingly without a care in the world, was exactly that of an innocent little girl. However, she had exceedingly convincing acting skills, such that it was impossible for Kaburagi to be sure whether she was serious or not. Thing was, Baba was of an incredibly long-lived species, hailed from a completely different world, and was different from Earth's humans in so many ways. Therefore, Kaburagi could not discern whether she really had such a huge heart that she could swallow down the anger of several hundreds of years, or whether she was just pretending to be assuaged while secretly waiting for the perfect opportunity to have her revenge.

If the fire of Baba's anger had truly already subsided, saying something that could be construed as doubting her could very well fan those fires back to life again. In addition, she was one of their comrades in Amaterasu, and she had scruples doubting a friend. But with that said, Kaburagi could not just ignore the alarm in her head either.

After having bought about 3 seconds of time by vaguely hemming and hawing for all these thoughts to run through her mind, Kaburagi matched Baba-Nyan's carefree tone while answering, "As far as I know, it's absolutely invincible. His barrier is deployed automatically without him having to remain conscious of it and even poison and radiation is ineffective against it."

That was a lie. Sago's barrier would get disengaged when he slept, and poison was as effective against him as any normal person. The only truth in her response was the claim that radiation did not work on him.

However, if Baba-Nyan was truly probing his defensive capabilities for the sake of taking revenge against Sago, then this lie should serve as an effective deterrence. After all, Kaburagi had practically just offered confirmation that the only way to get to Sago was through a PSI drive.

If Baba-Nyan had really asked her question out of curiosity alone, then this matter could just be laughed away as an exaggeration meant as a joke.

Regardless of which it was, it wouldn't be a problem either way.

"Is that so? This power of telekinesis truly never ceases to astonish me with what it is capable of. Kaburagi, this drink is extremely delicious. However, I am unable to bring myself to like this shiratama and this jelly. Could you consider leaving them out next time? So then, returning to our topic from before—"

Baba-Nyan casually moved the conversation along, returning to the historical account of how the demon lords in her word had fallen from power. The way she told it, like a master storyteller who causes all listeners to wait for the next word with bated breath, eventually caused Kaburagi to become thoroughly engrossed. After a while, the tiny alarm in Kaburagi's mind went silent.....until it was forgotten altogether.

Chapter 14: Baba, The Merciless Queen of the Alvu

Kuma-san was a veteran detective who had been involved in and helped resolve innumerable cases. He was also a constant participant in various martial arts tournaments, frequently taking the championship trophy back too while he was at it. In short, he was extremely well known in his circles, and very greatly respected.

So when this Kuma-san went back after the incident with Shouta-kun and sent out a notice to all on-site policemen involved with the investigation regarding espers and the Super Water Spheres to “tell me first thing if you find anything relevant,” everyone accepted it as a matter of fact, with no one the wiser. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he was the lead investigator on this case too.

Now, if any of our Amaterasu members got arrested (knock on wood), we could just call Kuma-san. If it wasn’t too big or too conspicuous an incident, then he could help us pull the wool over on the on-site policemen and get that member released. Although we were still far from the status of getting a free pass from the police just by flashing our dog tags, I had hopes that we would eventually get there. Baba also said that she had settled things with Detective Dirtbag, so there were no worries on that front either.

In addition, Kaburagi-san supplied Kuma-san with fragmented and ultimately useless pieces of information about us for him to report to his superiors, the ones directing this investigation who weren’t under Kaburagi-san’s control yet. This supplied the investigation with the justification to continue strong, as well as helped to bolster Kuma-san’s authority within the force as even higher than the assigned lead investigator who “continuously produced results.” He successfully managed to convince the top brass that “this investigation is going to need a lot more time to crack open” as they “needed to proceed with great caution.”

With this, we had the police sandwiched from the top and bottom, with Kaburagi-san applying pressure from the outside and Kuma-san arranging things

for us from the inside. There was no more reassuring combo. From what Kaburagi-san told me, her efforts at managing the intelligence agents from foreign agencies were also going well.

As a realistic problem, the humanoid World Shadows were actually quite vicious. Their standard strength was so high that your normal police officer would die for sure if he encountered one and tried to fight it. For starters, police batons were absolutely ineffective. Also, they had no bones or internal organs, so there was no point in using normal martial arts. Accurately sniping the stone core, which was only the size of a fist, as it moved all around would be an extremely difficult feat to pull off. In short, there was almost no chance of victory.

It would be a different story if weapons specifically chosen with a thorough understanding of what made up World Shadows were brought to bear—for example, bombs or flamethrowers—but your average policeman can't very well be walking around town with bombs or flamethrowers on their person at all times. As such, if the police wanted to deal with the World Shadows themselves, they would need to establish a dedicated anti-World Shadow squad.

The easiest way to deal with a World Shadow would be to run it over with a car, but the narrow alleyways, underground sewers, and abandoned buildings where they usually showed up were generally places that cars could not reach.

So in summary, the best option for the police would be to just leave the whole Amaterasu and World Shadows matter alone and not get involved. Based on the setting that World Shadows get strengthened and become more vicious by feeding on the fear of humans, thoughtlessly publicizing their existence or trying to deal with them half-heartedly would only make the situation even worse.

Kuma-san began taking up the habit of dropping by Ama-no-Iwato for a drink after work every once in a while. Most of the time, it would end up with either me just listening to his grumbling or us exchanging idle small talk. To my surprise, I found both of them unexpectedly fun, as the two of us clicked really well. Although we seemed to be on opposing sides, with me on the side of espers achieving things through superpowers, and him on the side that wanted

to beat up everything supernatural with his bare fists, the exchange of opinion that arose due to that difference between us also turned out surprisingly interesting.

Every once in a while, Kuma-san would lend me classic sci-fi works that could be said to be the forefathers of the modern battle genre, and I in turn introduced currently trending light novels to him. It was a very fulfilling exchange that we had going on between us.

If it wasn't just my ego speaking, Kuma-san and I had become really close friends in the blink of an eye. On off days, sometimes Kaburagi-san would join us, and the three of us would watch spy movies together or otherwise just spend time enjoying each others' company.

Also, we granted Kuma-san's request for a pair of gauntlet PSI drives by refitting one that had been made previously for my personal use. It ran on telekinetic fuel, such that when he turned it on, it would generate a close-ranged burst of telekinesis whenever he threw a punch. In effect, it was a shockwave emitter. With this PSI drive on hand, he should be able to win easily whenever he came across a World Shadow on his own.

PSI drives made for extremely good weapons. In addition to being very portable, they also did not leave damage on the surroundings and made no noise. Their output was also beyond reproach. The sole fly in the ointment was its troublesome maintenance due to its unique fuel source. Oh, and also that they were extremely expensive to make, given that they were made of platinum. As such, although it was unrealistic to arm the entire police force with them, equipping individuals on a personal level would still be quite manageable.

Kuma-san also had an affinity for a superpower (or so went the setting), but he himself was particular about beating up the supernatural while remaining a "normal human," so he turned out my offer to help him awaken his Seed. In light of that, when I asked about his request for a PSI drive, he replied that using weapons was fine. *To each his own, I suppose.* Well, it wasn't as if I didn't get where he was coming from. The fact of using tools and implements as well as one's wits and tact to quickly adapt to and overcome situations carried more meaning for someone "powerless." It was that rush from overcoming all odds that was key, I suppose. As a prime example, he did only use a piece of drain

spout to acquire greater reach and thoroughly thrashed Shouta-kun in their fight.

And as our newly joined external cooperator, the two students turned to him for help almost immediately. Presumably, during the time when the PSI drives were smuggled out, he was as yet completely uninvolved with Amaterasu. And yet now, he was so deeply involved with us that he was arranging things on our behalf within the police. In other words, he was definitely not the culprit and was a pro at investigations, which made him an extremely reliable ally. I would have been even more surprised to see them not rely on him.

The original plan was to have the students slowly gather clues that we drip fed them, battling with their internal doubts while slowly closing in on the truth. However, after the students consulted Kuma-san, he went straight to the cases whose contents had been switched out to take fingerprints. Then he sent that to the police lab for analysis.

Consequently, it immediately became revealed that Baba was the culprit.

Isn't it cheating to use professional forensics for this? Admittedly, it was entirely logical, and was a great way to quickly discern the culprit's identity with certainty. However, they had basically taken a shortcut through all the clues and feints that I had painstakingly prepared. *How about you try being in my shoes and see how I feel?* It was like a master swordsman barging into a mock sword battle between kids.

However, there was no point crying over spilt milk. In the first place, the scenario was already in shambles the instant these two detectives showed up. *I suppose I should actually be happy that we've managed things well enough to be where we are right now, right?*

On that fateful day in spring, the two students came to Ama-no-Iwato after sitting through their high school entrance ceremony and called Baba to the training room in our secret base.

The training room was covered with anti-heat tiles, and also lined with thick steel plates underneath. Aside from the ventilation fan and door, it was a completely barren room. In short, it was built and maintained in a way that it could withstand quite a bit of rampaging, even of the supernatural kind.

Having successfully called her over under the guise of wanting to ask her some questions about the PSI drives, Shouta-kun locked the door after all three of them had entered the room.

Baba tilted her head. “Hmm? Is there something that you do not wish for anyone else to overhear?”

“Oh yes it is. For you, that is.”

The sight of Shouta-kun blocking the way to the door with a hard look on his face caused Baba’s expression to also quickly turn stiff.

“Touka, this is—”

“Baba-san, please answer our questions honestly. Can you swear to Buddha that you definitely won’t lie?”

Touka-chan had circled around behind her back, so Baba turned around to shoot her a look, but only found herself being pressed to give oath.

“I-Indeed, I give mine word.”

“Baba, was it you who switched out the PSI drives in storage with red herrings?”

“.....Whatever are you talking about?”

Hats off to Baba for that slight pause before her answer. The devil is always in the details, isn’t it.

“We’ve discovered that several of the PSI drives in storage had been switched out with red-colored herrings two months ago. Baba, your fingerprints were found inside all of those cases.”

“Finger... print?”

“You don’t know about fingerprints? It’s these swirls on your fingers.”

When Shouta-kun spread out his hands and pointed to the tip of his fingers, Baba laughed.

“Whatever are you talking about? Everyone has those. Though the size and dimensions of each person’s finger may differ, they are the same for elders to babies and everyone else in between. Did you not know this?”

“That’s probably true only for elves. You are the one who apparently doesn’t know, but each and every single human’s fingerprints are different.”

When Shouta-kun took out a fingerprint comparison chart and spread it out to show her, nervousness started creeping into the composed look on Baba’s face.

Seriously, how are you making such detailed faces? You’re amazing, Baba. Is that even cold sweat that I see?

“I..... am the developer of the PSI drives. I pack them into the cases personally, so those fingerprints are surely from that time. Red herrings? I know nothing about that.”

“We found your fingerprints on the red herrings too.”

Shouta-kun’s cold tone made Baba suck in a sharp intake of air. Actually, what he just said was a lie. It was impossible to take fingerprints from the surface of a fish, what with all the scales and the slimy layer. Rather, this was a trick question that Shouta-kun had thought up under direct tutelage from the master of trick questions, Kuma-san himself. The truth regarding the fingerprints was that every Amaterasu member’s fingerprints had been found on the outside of all the cases, but only Baba’s had been planted on the inside of the switched-out ones.

“Didn’t you swear to Buddha just now, hmm? You swore that you definitely wouldn’t lie.”

“Eep?!”

Touka-chan clasped a hand on Baba’s shoulder from behind and stared at her up close with her pupils thoroughly dilated, which caused the latter to let out a small shriek. *Scary scary scary that’s freaking scary!* Even I, who was watching through telekinesis, got freaked out. *You look like one of those cursed Japanese dolls, Touka-chan!*



However, the fact that Baba had screamed in Japanese instead of her mother tongue meant that she still wasn't on the ropes just yet. Her acting skills were just that good.

"Why did you lie? What's wrong, cat got your tongue? I'm sure you must have a reason that could convince us, don't you? Aren't we friends? If you didn't smuggle out the PSI drives, then how do you explain the fingerprints?"

"Whoa calm down, Touka. But Baba, just as she said, if there are any circumstances that we are unaware of, please tell us. We haven't told Kaburagisan or Master about any of this yet. If there was really no helping it, and you had no other choice but to do this, then just say so. We'll help you as best we can, and we'll also go apologize together with you."

"However, if you had pulled off that nonsense with the red herring on purpose, then I will bring you to a temple and ring the bonsho bell there with your head 108 times. I won't stop until every last scrap of earthly temptation is gone from your head, not even if you cry."

"Touka."

"What?"

"Can you be quiet for a sec?"

"....." Touka-chan did indeed stop talking, but she did not loosen her grip on Baba's shoulder.

Shouta-kun kindly said, "Come on, Baba, you know us. Touka might be really angry right now, but you don't need to be afraid. The PSI drives that you leaked outside, we can just retrieve them all. We'll help you. You'll probably be punished somewhat, but whatever it is, we'll ask for the same, so we will be there to get through it together with you. Aren't we living under the same roof together? Haven't we eaten meals together? Haven't we played together, hung out together? It's not only the happy times, but also during the tough times that we'll be there with you. That's what it means to be friends and comrades, isn't it?"

As Shouta looked straight into Baba's eyes, having kneeled down to match his height with hers, Baba shifted her gaze away, almost as if the sight was too

much for her to handle.

Where else in the world can you find another high school first year who could deliver such embarrassing yet dashing lines without even a hint of mortification? No wait, hold on, didn't that sound like a confe—DUDE look behind you! Ah~ah, Touka-chan is totally sulking! Of course that would happen if you make your main heroine shut up while you flirt with a loli baba! Dude, I thought you liked big boobs! Why don't you take a proper look at Touka-chan, she's totally in the middle of a growth spurt in various ways!

But leaving that aside, I fully understood the conclusion that the two of them had arrived at. In short, they had chosen Route D, “talk it out.” *They sure went with a peaceful one.* Now, if they had just blindly believed in “Come on, we're comrades, aren't we? So tell us the truth!” in a brain-dead manner, then I was completely ready to punish them with a lesson on the harshness of the world. However, they made sure to collect hard evidence first, used it to identify the traitor, then accepted the fact of that betrayal and yet still chose to forgive and attempt to make amends. These kids were both smart *and* warm-hearted.

Sorry for thinking that Route A, “catch Baba off her guard, then tie her up and thrust her before Kaburagi-san” would be fun. It's me, I'm the one whose heart has been corrupted.

I telekinetically vibrated the dog tag that Baba was wearing around her neck underneath her clothes, using Morse code to send her confirmation that we were officially going with Route D. Immediately after that, Baba fell to her knees and clutched her head as if in pain.

“Shouta..... Touka..... I-I-I.....ughhh.....”

“So there really were some circumstances?”

“Hold on. She seems weird.”

Baba's eyes rolled into the back of her head and she began muttering to herself. “S-Stop, no, be silent, I shall do no such th—they are my family, my comrades. Such abhorrence is... *ugh*... my head... be silent..... say no more.....!”

“Eh, what's this? What's going on? Was I really that naggy?”

“That’s not it, this... she’s probably having auditory hallucinations. Touka, hold Baba down for me. Baba, it’s all right. I’m here for you. You can do it. I believe in you. Don’t lose to something like this!”

Rather than Shouta being perceptive, chances were much higher that he had probably seen or read similar developments in manga or works in some other medium. I had too.

Shouta-kun grabbed Baba’s hands. From behind, Touka enveloped Baba’s tiny frame in a bear hug and tried to hold her down, even as she was shaking violently in seeming agony. Eventually, after a short struggle against whatever it was that was whispering to her inside her head, Baba cried out at the top of her voice, “Be gone from mine head!”

Matching the timing of Baba’s shout, I created a mini-World Shadow the size of the tip of someone’s pinky fingernail around a small glass marble that had been hidden within Baba’s voluminous silver hair. While scratching the glass marble to create a screeching sound similar to a shriek, I sent it shooting out from the top of her head.

“Uwah?!”

“*Kyah!* No, what’s thi—it’s stuck to me?!”

The mini-World Shadow had clasped onto Touka-chan’s arm with all the momentum from its propelled flight, and began crawling up her arm by rapidly moving its numerous short legs in a scurrying manner. *How many hours had I spent watching videos of cockroaches in disgust for the sake of perfectly replicating this movement that would evoke instinctive repulsion in any and all humans?I lost count, that’s how many.*

Just as intended, Touka-chan raised a high-pitched scream, then crimson flames erupted from every part of her body, incinerating the mini-World Shadow within a split second. The heat wave generated was so great that it sent the hair of all three people flying. The molten remains of the mini-World Shadow fell to the ground, its original form completely indiscernible.

The strong will that had been bolstered by the warmth that Baba received from her comrades had been insufferable to the World Shadow that had been possessing her, such that eventually it could not hold on any longer and got

expelled. Yeah all right, it's a bit slapdash. But hey, the power of friendship, am I right? This sort of thing happens in works of fantasy all the time, so I'm sure the two of them wouldn't think it strange at all.

The part about how the World Shadow that had gotten expelled was scrambling toward Touka-chan's head in search of a new host to leech onto was just a little additional touch to up the horror level.

After weakly gripping Touka-chan's hand, which was slick with cold sweat, Baba quietly mouthed "thank you" before (pretending to) fainting dead away. That left Shouta-kun looking gravely toward the leftovers of the World Shadow and Touka-chan shivering and furiously rubbing her arm in wholehearted disgust.

While still leaving a faint sense of unease lingering in the air, this was how the newest minion of the demon lord—this parasite-type World Shadow that had instigated this betrayal from Baba—was thoroughly defeated.



Afterward, the remainders of the mini-World Shadow were collected as a valuable sample under Kaburagi-san's instruction, and then sent to Boss for analysis. According to the result that he sent back, World Shadows were fundamentally simple manifestations of people's desire for power, and as such it was impossible for them to seek to take advantage of someone's weakness like the way this one did while leeching onto Baba. However, it was a fact that it had. So what gives?

Well, even Boss did not fully understand it. However, the fact that the person who got possessed was the very person developing weapons intended to kill the demon lord... well, it was extremely unlikely that was a mere coincidence.

The way Baba told it, the experience of being possessed felt like something (might have been the demon lord, couldn't tell) had been interfering with her thinking through the World Shadow, influencing her to do things with evil intent. But in light of how roundabout the method was, as well as how it didn't actually cause any severe or permanent consequences, Boss conjectured that such methods really were contrary to the real nature of the World Shadows and thus consequently they were very bad at it.

If Baba's mind had been completely taken over by the World Shadow, it could have made her stab Shouta when he had his guard down, or even made her commit suicide. The fact that it had instead led her to adopt such roundabout methods like smuggling out PSI drives and replacing them with red-colored fish was proof that she had not been under complete mind control, and that the effect of the mini-World Shadow was merely on the level of directing her thought pattern toward an evil tendency.

Another way of putting it would be like a fish that tried to run on land and failed. World Shadows were innately incapable of properly carrying out this kind of mind game.

Lastly, according to the psychometry analysis performed on the mini-World Shadow remains, Boss determined that it was in an extremely unstable state, which meant that it would have died naturally in a few days even if Touka didn't incinerate it. The final conclusion that Boss arrived at was that it was actually so weak that it couldn't leech onto espers, those with a Seed of a superpower, or even those aware of and on guard against it.

In other words, those aware of this new form of World Shadow wouldn't get possessed by it, whereas espers (i.e. all Amaterasu members) don't even have to do anything and would still be immune against them. The whole psychometry thing was a lie to give more credence to this backstory.

Thing was, if I didn't issue an official declaration like this, the two students might fall into the mire of constantly doubting whether the other members were possessed or not. Maintaining their mental health was also a very important part of our duties as those in the setup team.

.....That said, it was great that I could brew up whatever cover story I wanted to justify Baba's betrayal and explain the identity of the mini-World Shadow, but it was also a worry that things might get out of hand if I went overboard. *Gotta be more careful about this kind of thing, I suppose.*

For the sake of recuperating from the mental strain of having been possessed, Baba was going to take a break from commuting to Kaneyama Tech and stay at the Takahashi residence for some much-needed rest. During that time, we were going to (pretend to) work hard at retrieving all the PSI drives that had made

their way onto the streets. The plan was to lay most of the credit for the retrievals at the feet of Kaburagi-san's money and connections.

When Baba recovered fully and returned to us, everything would be back to normal. Having overcome this trial by learning suspicion as well as faith in their comrades in spite of that suspicion, the two students were going to open the chapter on their high school life with a new heart and a fresh mindset———



Nighttime on the same day found Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan in the changing area right outside the bathroom of the Takahashi residence. She took off all her clothes, transferred the branch in her hair to a vase, then softly stepped into the bathroom, within which was only a shower and a bathtub. She locked the door to the room, then stood still, listening carefully. The extraordinary sense of hearing unique to the Alvu confirmed that none of the residents of the house were anywhere near the bathroom, and that none of them were paying any attention to her.

Without even giving a glance toward the bathtub, Baba-Nyan turned on the showerhead and pointed it at a corner of the room to create the sound of running water as a camouflage.

Next, she placed a finger on one of the tiles depressed into the wall, then moved in the order of right, up, down, push, right. Immediately, the click of a lock being disengaged could be heard. The tile fell out into her hand, revealing a space barely large enough to fit an attaché case. Packed inside that space were several platinum plates processed to varying degrees, as well as various tools, blueprints, and parts of a frame.

After confirming that everything was present and untouched since she'd last seen them, Baba heaved a sigh of relief. It had taken her six whole months to create just this small of a space. It was a secret that nobody knew about. This was true of not only the members of the Takahashi family, but Sago as well. Due to his promise with Shiori Kaburagi, the nearly omniscient Kinemitsu Sago, most likely first and last of his kind, had a policy of never peeking at females in the bathroom. Consequently, Baba had been bringing in tiny bits and pieces hidden in her underwear and hair and using her one hour in the bathroom—the

only place she could know for sure that Sago's otherwise undetectable telekinetic monitoring would not be watching—to slowly work on this day by day.

Baba-Nyan took the metal plates and tools out from the space, then began working on them with incredible speed and precision. Her movements were even more mechanical than actual machines, and her eyes were filled with concentration.

What she was making was, of course, a PSI drive. And it wasn't any run-of-the-mill PSI drive. No, it was to be the most powerful one that she had made to date, one that was guaranteed to penetrate through Sago's resistance. It was to be the ultimate anti-demon lord weapon.

Another platinum part just got finished.

Through Baba-Nyan's research at Kaneyama Tech, she had already figured out the optimum design that would be the most effective against the superpowers that existed on Earth. The blueprints were already finalized. All that was left was to work according to them.

All of a sudden, the memory of the time when Sago revealed the truth regarding the secret organization arose unbidden in Baba-Nyan's mind. She abruptly clapped a hand over her mouth, barely preventing herself from vomiting at the red-hot anger that pulsed through her veins. The greatest rage that Baba had felt throughout her long, long life was not so easily forgotten. Even now, it continued smoldering inside her chest. She was only barely suppressing the urge to scream and wail and go on a rampage.

This was a secret project, after all. No one must be allowed to catch on.

Detective Yasui, whose help Baba had enlisted, had not been informed of the overall plan. The way Baba was handling him was by repeatedly sending him on trifling fetch quests while making them sound mysterious and important while paying him handsomely each time. By the time he got accustomed to this and started to trust her, that was when she would inveigle him into doing *one last job* for her.

"...I'm running out of time," murmured Baba while resuming her work.

At around the 50 minute mark, she wrapped up what she was doing and carefully put everything back into the hole in the wall. With the five minutes she had remaining, she then gave her body a quick wash before stepping out nonchalantly.

When Shouta offered a popsicle for her to enjoy as a snack to cool down with after her supposedly warm bath, she accepted it with a bright smile while saying thanks. It was a pure and innocent smile, free from even the tiniest taint of maliciousness.

Chapter 15: The President Who Cried Out Love in the Center of the World

Kaneyama Tech Co., Ltd. was a metalworking company with its head office based in Adachi City. It had been founded 4 years ago by Kaneo Kaneyama (25 years old), who was both the company's current company president as well as its representative director. The company had ¥60 billion in sales and ¥2 billion in stockholders' equity, and there were 280 employees on its payroll. It was highly regarded as a prominent up-and-coming start-up company, but its scale was already sufficient to earn it a seat at the table with all the big corporations, albeit only at the far end. After a rather sharp change in management policies two years ago, it had seen growth on the level of not only a carp swimming against an upstream current, but up a vertical waterfall. It was whispered in many circles that it might not be long before it made the final jump to transform into a full-blown dragon.

With a focus on the extraction, refining, and processing of rare metals from deep sea rare earth, Kaneyama Tech was fast becoming a major player when it came to the production of high-strength and highly anti-corrosive metals as well as incredibly detailed parts manufacturing. Additionally, it also had a rather sizable presence in the methane hydrate market. While its capability of taking care of every step of the production chain—from raw material procuring to parts manufacturing—within the company itself enabled it to greatly reduce operational costs, it was also conspicuous for its overspending on unnecessary production lines and maintenance costs due to the persistent lack of manpower it suffered as a result of its rapid growth and expansion.

As if all that was not enough, Kaneyama Tech was also employing previously unheard-of technology to create artificial diamonds much larger than what had been achieved previously. Though low in quantity, each piece was snapped up by aficionados at sky high prices as soon as it hit the market, contributing in no small way to Kaneyama Tech's overall revenue.

By gradually yet steadily absorbing and buying out unprofitable small town factories and the various patents they owned that were related to rare metals, the company was continuously securing highly skilled workers. Add to that the very humane working conditions in the company, high salaries, thorough welfare benefits, and its permanently open door for new recruits throughout the year, and there was much that fueled expectations of the company's continued growth.

At the same time, Kaneyama Tech was both a target of jealousy from its competitors as well as a target of suspicion. Exactly how was the company procuring the methane hydrate and deep sea rare earth that were the foundation to its abrupt growth? With existent technologies, pulling up these resources from the bottom of the ocean would cost way too much, to the point it would be impossible to turn a profit doing so. It was a complete mystery where the trucks that regularly carried in shipments of rare earth came from.

The company's sharp advancement in detailed production was also another point that drew suspicion. Previously, Kaneyama Tech had been steadily acquiring processing know-how while working on their enormous stock of rare metals, but in the past few months it had displayed incredible improvements in product quality and production volume.

The overall change seemed so bizarre and abrupt that it was almost comparable to when Japan did away with its isolationist policy and Western craftsmen were teaching Japanese craftsmen their advanced knowledge and techniques.

For all those reasons, Kaneyama Tech was the hottest topic within its industry, as well as a target of both curiosity and envy. And within its storage warehouse lay the PSI drives that Baba had supposedly smuggled out and scattered throughout the streets of Tokyo (she had not actually). Naturally, all of the PSI drives were packaged in such a way that it was impossible to tell what they were.

Today, Kaburagi-san and I were visiting the head office, having been called out by the company president regarding those packages. It was perfect timing, so we intended to retrieve them while we were there.

I had the honor of chauffeuring Her Ducal Highness Kaburagi of Marineford in her luxury car. After parking the car, I got out and circled around back to open the door for her, even putting a footstool in place for her to step onto while exiting the car. Then I offered my hand to escort her into the building.

Her Ducal Highness' raiment of the day was a long-sleeved *furisode* kimono with a deep blue color scheme and traditional Japanese *geta* sandals. Of course, her entire coordinated outfit was tailor made. *Kaburagi-san looks absolutely gorgeous in whatever she wears.*



Together, we entered the office lobby, with Kaburagi-san all smiles from playing make-believe at being a rich young lady from a Japanese family and me maintaining 3 steps behind her as if I was a butler. Upon stepping in, we found the company president himself waiting restlessly to greet her in person. He was a gentle-looking handsome man wearing a suit with fluffy short hair done up in a playful style. The fact that he had graduated from the same alma mater as Kaburagi-san meant that he was also a Tokyo University alumni. Equipped with brains, money, and looks, he was a high specced specimen of a man through and through.

“Hey there, Shiori-san. Welcome, welcome. You look absolutely lovely today too. Although this pales in your presence, but would you do me the honor of accepting this humble offering?”

“Good morning, Kaneyama-san. Thank you.” Kaburagi-san only smiled faintly as a response to the lavish bouquet of flowers—*what is this supposed to be, a proposal bouquet?*— and those lines that would set anyone’s teeth on edge. However, even that tiny smile was enough to send the company president blushing like mad while bringing a hand up to fiddle with his ear. *He really likes Kaburagi-san, doesn’t he. I think Kaburagi-san once told me that they’ve known each other since high school, right?*

And this was something that I learned only afterward, but he was the one with whom Kaburagi-san’s parents had arranged for her to have the marriage interview with the other day. What’s more, apparently he had been the one who laid all the groundwork to make it happen. *Talk about being passionate. But is it only cus I’m a guy that that sounds a bit creepy to me?*

“Sago-san, welcome.”

“Thank you. Nice meeting you again.”

That was a complete 180 in terms of reception. His greeting toward me was very light, and of course, I got no presents. *What, are you insinuating that I should just enjoy the fragrance of the flowers in the air? Though to be fair, I would find it troubling in a different way if he had prepared a present for me too, I suppose.*

I had introduced myself as Kaburagi-san’s agent for when she couldn’t come

in person, so his treatment of me was a bit offhand. *But then again, this seems about right when you compare a mere peon to a duchess. A man capable of treating a yamato nadeshiko—the personification of the ideal Japanese lady—with the same amount of respect as he would a commonplace man the equal of which can be found just by throwing a rope into a random crowd is either a suuuuper good person or just outright gay.*

“.....”

“.....What is it?”

“.....No, it’s nothing. Please pardon me. Shiori-san, I’ve managed to get my hands on some of those tea leaves that we talked about last time.”

That pause where he silently looked at Kaburagi-san and me in turn made me a bit nervous, but then he looked away and returned to his “I <3 Kaburagi-san” mode. When I tried to figure out what it was that had set him off, I realized that I had forgotten to put on a tie. *Why didn’t you remind me, Kaburagi-san..... no wonder I thought it felt a bit breezy around my neck.*

Having realized it made me feel a bit self-conscious, so I used telekinesis to pick up a necktie from Ama-no-Iwato, then started bringing it over through the underground sewage system so as to avoid the public eye. After having planned so many World Shadow fights to date, somewhere along the way I had almost completely memorized the whole thing’s entire layout.

After passing the bouquet of flowers to me, Kaburagi-san gently but firmly turned down President Kaneyama’s passionate invitation to tea, instead prompting him to get to the purpose of our visit today. He looked slightly crestfallen, but then quickly took it upon himself to lead us to his reception office.

“Your hand, my lady?”

“Thank you. But I’m good.”

By the stairs, President Kaneyama gracefully proffered his hand, but Kaburagi-san refused him yet again, in no uncertain terms. It was the objective truth that Kaburagi-san’s beauty was such that she would turn the head of every single man she walked past. If she thoughtlessly did anything that could be construed

as a hint or invitation toward anyone that she had no interest in, then it might lead to a rain of blood. Therefore, she apparently took extra care to not be coy with people's goodwill or do anything that could get someone's hopes up. So in case it wasn't clear, it meant that President Kaneyama also numbered among those that she "had no interest in." Though it seemed to me that he was aware of it even while making his moves.....

After stepping into the reception office and while waiting for the middle-aged admin woman to bring over cups of black tea and refreshments, I stepped over to the window and opened it a crack. Then the necktie that had just passed through the sewage system, had kept pace while zipping from underneath one car to the next, and had seemingly been "blown up by the wind" finally reached its destination in my hand. I had to suppress the part of myself that was about to question the necessity of having made the necktie go through a great big adventure while tying it around my neck. *What a sophisticated yet completely unnecessary use of telekinesis. I mean sure, it's always been a dream of mine back when I was in elementary school to be able to fetch something that I had forgotten with telekinesis, but when I actually do it..... wow, it feels this hollow, huh.*

When the woman finished setting the table, she exited the room, leaving the three of us sitting in sofas and facing each other over a tea table. After a short while of enjoying the fragrant aroma of the tea, we finally got down to business. Without touching the A4-sized manila envelope conspicuously left on the table, President Kaneyama started the conversation with a grave look on his face.

"Thing is, once every week we checked in on the packages that were left in our care. There had been no issues so far, at least until our inspection last week, when we noticed that one of them had signs of having been opened and resealed. Thinking it strange, we took the liberty of opening the package for confirmations' sake, and found only stones inside. Shiori-san, was it stones that you had been keeping with us?"

".....No, it was not." Kaburagi-san shared a brief moment of eye contact with me before shaking her head. We had kept the contents of the packages a secret from the president, but it was supposed to be PSI drives—and definitely *not* stones—inside all of the packages.

The loss and swapping out of PSI drives. *Wait, I've heard this story before. What is this, the same plot twist again?* However, we had made no plans whatsoever to swap out the PSI drives stored at Kaneyama Tech with stones. The look of bewilderment on Kaburagi-san's face was real. I started getting a bad feeling. A chill ran down my back, as if someone had just dropped an ice cube down the collar of my shirt. *Wait, are you saying that a real swap had occurred?*

The president nodded in response to Kaburagi-san's reply, then continued, "That's what we thought, so we proceeded to dig a little further. On the package, we found fingerprints from only myself, Shiori-san, and Sago-san. No one else. We then checked the security cameras while hoping that we had caught the culprit on tape, but unfortunately the camera installed at the entrance to the storeroom had actually broken down previously and was in the middle of getting fixed, which meant there was no way to confirm the traffic through that door. However, when you entrusted us with your packages, we had installed a key card reader as part of our effort to strengthen our security measures. Discounting the possibility of superpowers, the only way to get inside is through presenting a key card. And the only people who possess a key card are the three of us currently inside this room."

Regardless of whether he made that reference to superpowers unwittingly or on purpose, it still made my heart skip a beat.

So what is he saying? What happened to the PSI drives? I wanted very much to tell him to get straight to his point and stop beating around the bush, but I couldn't bring myself to interrupt a company president and so just continued listening intently.

"Shiori-san, you are our client. As such, I cannot imagine any reason why you would switch out the contents of your own packages with stones. After all, you could have just taken them back whenever you wanted to. Then as for me, I myself know that I did not do this. That left only one suspect. Accordingly, we hired a private detective to look into this, and this was what they found. Were the contents of your packages the devices shaped like swords and shields and various other weapons being made in our research labs?"

President Kaneyama then spread the contents of the manila envelope on the

table: payment reference indicating the transfer of several million yen into an account under the name “Kinemitsu Sago”; a document detailing the address of the payer; a picture of the inside of a warehouse taken from the outside through a window, within which a spear PSI drive could be seen leaning against the wall; a page from an auction catalogue in English that depicted a drawing of a PSI drive, accompanied by a blurb describing it as some sort of artifact; a picture of a man who looked like me peering into a window of Kaneyama Tech’s head office during nighttime.

Naturally, I had absolutely no knowledge or recollection regarding any of it. *So..... what does this mean exactly? Wait, has someone fabricated evidence in an effort to frame me?*

In a fluster, I looked up from the collection of fabricated evidence, only to find the president glaring at me while declaring in conclusion, “I believe that Sago-san is the culprit, or at least someone deeply involved with the swapping and smuggling out of the contents of the packages. This is why I called the both of you here today.”

“I-I didn’t do it. I’m being framed!”

“All culprits say that.”

“I know right! The line is such a common trope that it’s almost the go-to response for culprit charac—no I mean seriously, I didn’t do it! It really wasn’t me! I’m not just saying it, I mean it!”

“Sago-san, calm down. Slowly, take a deeeep breath. I know that you didn’t do it, all right?” Kaburagi-san grabbed my hand and smiled at me.

Obediently, I took a very deep breath. But instead of calming me down, it only ended up making me even more agitated. The president was literally glaring daggers at me and the hand being held by Kaburagi-san. *Forgive me.*

“So clearly Kaneyama is trying to frame Sago-san, but how do you think we should handle this?”

“Wha—?” I was really surprised when Kaburagi-san suddenly asked me for advice, but then I noticed that time had been stopped. Before, the world during stopped time would be in pitch darkness if she didn’t previously prepare a light

source, but now it was stopped in such a natural state that it took me a moment to recognize it for what it was. The world was as colorful as it usually was, and everything looked completely natural. The fruit of Kaburagi-san's daily efforts was on full display.

"Hrm..... what do you think about the possibility that it was someone else who had fabricated this evidence and that President Kaneyama had just been gullible enough to fall for it?"

"Have you already forgotten what he said about the card keys? Since it wasn't me and it wasn't Sago-san, then he must be the culprit. I really thought he was a better man than that."

Uwah, that cold tone and the dropping of honorifics..... so she's that disillusioned with him, huh. What a poor..... but not really, no. I myself am literally just about to be socially murdered by him right now, aren't I? Ok yeah, the only thing I'm feeling is anger. But what was it that I did that caused him to hate me this much? Was it the necktie? Did me coming over without wearing a necktie piss him off that much? No, no, no, that can't be it. But no other incident comes to mind though.

"What motive could he possibly have for doing this?"

"Kaneyama is in love with me, isn't he? This is very likely envy toward the close relationship that I share with you."

"Uh..... so you're aware of it? I mean, I had somehow gotten that vibe too, but....."

"Pretending to not notice and putting on a cute innocent act is against my sense of beauty," replied Kaburagi-san without even the slightest delay. Then again, if she had responded with something along the lines of "Eh~ No way~ But I'm just so ugly, there's no way he likes me~ (squirming delightedly)" then I would have seriously doubted her sanity. It was a relief to see that she was her normal self.

But still, trying to pull me down due to envy, huh. There isn't even the slightest chance that a frame job like this would succeed, but I suppose the situation might not look that way in the president's eyes.

President Kaneyama was under the misunderstanding that the relationship between Kaburagi-san and I was only that of an employer and an employed representative. Or perhaps he had dug far enough to think that I was someone who Kaburagi-san had introduced a bartending job to, and that she was a regular customer at said bar. But never in his wildest imaginations would it ever occur to him that our closeness was on the level of being the co-founders of a make-believe secret organization.

If Kaburagi-san and I were really just employer and employee, or even just a bar master and a regular customer, then all the effort put into fabricating all this evidence could indeed have been sufficient. After all, Kaburagi-san and President Kaneyama were friends that went all the way back to high school. Would she believe an innocent old friend, or a business partner against whom plenty of evidence had been gathered? The answer was all too easy to see.

However, the true state of affairs was hardly worth talking about. President Kaneyama had apparently gone to great lengths in an attempt to get rid of the strange new man who had seemingly come out of nowhere and gotten strangely close to Kaburagi-san in a suspiciously short amount of time, but all his efforts had been in vain.

“We had made sure to remove the fuel cells from all of the PSI drives that we stored here at Kaneyama Tech. Therefore, even if the PSI drives really did get out, at least we don’t have to worry about the worst case scenario of our superpowers being exposed. So then, what should we do? You’re the victim here, Sago-san, so I’ll go along with the direction you want to take. We’re almost at the 44 second mark, do you want me to stop time again so you can think about it?”

“.....No, I’m good. As for the rest—”

Time resumed.

“—Leave it all to me. Can you wait outside for a while?”

“All right.”

“Shiori-san?”

While leaving the bouquet of flowers behind, Kaburagi-san shot a glance the

temperature of Eternal Force Blizzard toward President Kaneyama before exiting the room.

From the president's perspective, what just happened must have looked like me being flustered → Kaburagi-san pacifying me → me regaining my calm immediately → Kaburagi-san leaving the room as if she and I had understood each other in a split second without having to say anything. His face was extremely pale. That last look must have been extremely effective.

".....Sago-san, if you intend to confess your crime, then I'm not against settling things quietly. I'll also help mediate between you and her—"

"Are you talking into a mirror right now?" I asked, deflecting the words that the president only barely managed right back at him.

He retorted angrily, "That's quite some confidence you have there. Do you still intend on playing innocent in the face of all this evidence?"

"This isn't a matter of evidence, but of trustworthiness with Kaburagi-san, isn't it?"

".....What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"Even if you succeed in setting me up as a criminal, getting yourself hated by Kaburagi-san during the process would render everything meaningless, wouldn't it?"

The president fell silent from the precise jab at the heart of the matter. He must have deduced from Kaburagi-san's attitude and my words that his trap had already been seen through. He lowered his eyes briefly, then slowly stood up and walked toward the windowsill. After gazing at the skyscrapers that dotted Tokyo's cityscape for a while, he started talking. "The smile on Shiori-san's face when she was with you was too bright for me to look at. That was a gentle smile that came from the bottom of her heart, free of even the slightest hint of anxiety or nervousness. The moment I saw her make that face, I realized that the smiles that I had been looking at the entire time were all forced and superficial. This is a pretty pathetic story, isn't it? I was envious of you. From the very bottom of my heart, I was envious of what you had....."

I also stood up, and made my way over to the president as he continued

confessing.

“Even with all this trickery, I had failed to undermine the sense of trust between Shiori-san and you. All right, I admit it, wretched though it makes me: it’s my complete defeat. In the eyes of society, I am a successful man. Everything that I’ve wanted, I’ve acquired. However, what I really wanted most—hm?”

I gently tapped the shoulder of the president in the middle of his soliloquy. When he turned his face around, I landed a punch squarely on his right cheek.

“*Bogeh?!*”

I mounted the president who had fallen to the ground, then gave my anger full reign as I also punched the left side of his face. “This is for trying to frame me!”

Once more, I punched his right cheek. *Is this the mouth that refuses to shut up?* “This is for the heartache you’re causing your parents with how terrible of a person you had become!”

Another punch to his left cheek. If he had earnestly apologized for what he had done, then I wouldn’t have laid a finger on him. But instead, he had gone and started blathering on about shit that I couldn’t care less about. “This is on behalf of your friends!”

Right cheek again. After doing something wrong, the first thing you should do is say “sorry,” isn’t it? Even elementary kids know this. “This is on behalf of the policemen who’re going to have to come all the way down here to arrest you!”

Left cheek. *I know people say that love makes one blind, but there are limits, all right? Did you even stop for a minute to consider my position, the position of someone who almost got completely screwed over?* “This is on behalf of the lawyer who’s going to have to defend you in court!

Then this is for myself once again!

Lastly, one more for myself!

All right, done!”

The president’s face had turned into something awful, but my fists had also

started to hurt with all the punching and so I decided to call it off. I was worried that I was going to break my wrist if I had continued wailing on him. However, aside from the pain in my hands, I felt completely refreshed. Whoever it was that said that revenge only feels hollow and meaningless was lying. Thanks to having gone completely ham on doling out payback, all my indignation and anger was completely gone.

I grabbed the lapels of the barely conscious president and forcibly pulled him to his feet. Despite tottering severely, he somehow managed to find his balance and stand on his own. Then he looked straight at me with an exhausted expression on his red and swollen cheeks.

“I do acknowledge that what I did was a terrible thing. But I will not apologize. Even if I have to smear your name—”

“Dude, apologize to me.”

“—in order to earn—”

“A. Po. Lo. Gize. I don’t need any more of that bullshit you’re spouting.”

“—Shiori-san’s love, I—”

“First apologize to me. Say you’re sorry.”

“.....Sorry.”

“There you go!”

I was worried for a while that he was so far gone that he wasn’t capable of apologizing after doing something wrong, but after several prompts, he finally gave in and apologized. *What a relief. Now I can forgive him.*

Although he had leaked the PSI drives for real, all the fuel had been taken out, so there was no worry about widespread superpowered damage. I had also dodged the attempt to frame me at the very last moment. Though the incident had been upsetting, no permanent damage had been done.

No one was completely beyond succumbing to temptation. Though sometimes that leads to truly unforgivable acts, I wanted to forgive what I could forgive. I mean, I *was* feeling completely refreshed too, after having vented all my negative emotions onto his face.

“Have you shown this fabricated nonsense to anyone else other than Kaburagi-san and me?”

“N-No, I haven’t..... Wait, weren’t you going to call the police?”

“What was that? Oh, the police? Hmm..... nah, I already dealt out my personal justice. I did just get your apology too.” *What was this guy even talking about? Did he not understand why I had Kaburagi-san exit the room? Couldn’t he tell from that alone that I wanted to settle this one-on-one from the start?*

In the first place, if I intended on turning him over to the cops, then I wouldn’t have punched him. Instead of leaving it up to the legal system, I, as the victim, had already pronounced my own judgment on him. If I punched *and* reported him, then that would be double the punishment. I had also given him punches on behalf of the people who would have been inconvenienced or bothered if he got arrested, so the ledger was fully balanced on that front too.

More like, I realized this just now, but that was totally aggravated assault, wasn’t it? Shit. Maybe those people who warned against mindlessly giving in to the urge to take revenge might have had a point after all.

As I slightly regretted my actions, President Kaneyama did his best to pull a serious face with his red and swollen cheeks. “Is that so..... in that case, Sago-san. In light of that magnanimity of yours, I wish to make a request of you.”

“Huh?”

“Though it pains me to admit it, it is clear to me that Shiori-san is happiest when she’s with you. So you go on and make sure that remains true, even if you have to exchange your life for it.”

“What?Ahh, you mean.....?” Although this was a line that I had heard a million times in manga and dramas before, they carried an unnatural weight when coming from this crazy psychopath yandere president. It wasn’t a request anymore, but a command.

At the same time, things clicked in my mind. No wonder he couldn’t grab Kaburagi-san’s heart. He didn’t understand her at all.

I mean, what the hell is with the “go on and make her happy even if it costs you your life” thing. Why do I have to devote myself so completely to her? Aren’t

friends and family members supposed to depend on each other? If Kaburagi-san laid down her life to help me, it wouldn't make me happy at all. I'm sure it's the same for her too. Kaburagi-san is an independent woman, all right? Sure, she may have her weaknesses, but she is not a damsel in distress. She is not someone who only needs protecting, and neither is she the kind of person who would be satisfied only ever being on the receiving end. A single-sided "I'll make you happy" is only a mockery of who Kaburagi-san is. The correct words to her heart are "I'll make you happy, so please make me happy too. Let's live life together."

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." His favor meter with me was far from being high enough that I would give him love advice. *Although it was really high about an hour ago, you were the one who crashed it yourself.*

Then again, there wasn't much point in rejecting him offhand here and, by angering him, sowing possible seeds of discord for the future. Therefore, I decided to reply in the affirmative just to get him off my case. "All right. And this isn't exactly in exchange, but I also have a request for you."

"Let me hear it."

"Please don't sue me for aggravated assault. Like, seriously. Please don't."

President Kaneyama looked startled for a while, then burst out into laughter. He laughed and laughed and laughed until he laughed too much and groaned while suppressing the wounds on his face. *Oi, what's so funny? This is important, dammit.*

After his laughter subsided, President Kaneyama and I had a quick discussion, during which I got him to promise to dispose of the fabricated "evidence" and recollect all the leaked PSI drives.

When the talk was over and I was about to take my leave, President Kaneyama said, "I had thought to keep this to myself, but out of respect for you, I'll say this: Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan has been making suspicious movements. Be wary of her."

"Sure, 'k," I replied with a perfunctory nod. He didn't need to tell me, I was

aware. Most likely he was referring to all the things that she had done so that Shouta-kun and Touka-chan would grow suspicious of her. *This person sure is sharp in all the wrong places, isn't he.*

I then left the room for real, and found Kaburagi-san waiting for me by the main entrance. While walking shoulder to shoulder on our way over to the car parked in the parking lot, Kaburagi-san asked, "How did it go?"

"Everything's settled. He'll recollect the PSI drives for us and destroy the fabricated 'evidence.'"

"Did you two settle things properly though? What if he was only pretending to be repentant?"

"That crazy 'I <3 Kaburagi-san' man went so far as to say 'you go on and make Kaburagi-san happy,' so he was most likely completely serious."

".....How did you reply to that?"

"Ha~ha~ha~ No can do, miss. It was a manly promise from one guy to another, so I can't tell even you!"

Even if it was only lip service, "I promised to make you happy" was just so embarrassing that there was no way I could bring myself to say it out loud. I tried to gloss over it with a silly joke, which prompted her to giggle to herself.

For several days afterward, Kaburagi-san was permanently in a really great mood.



"Baba-san, has there been anything bothering you recently?"

On the first day of the Golden Week holiday, all the members of the secret organization Amaterasu were gathered in Ama-no-Iwato, raising a lively commotion. Baba-Nyan was sitting in the counter seat next to the wall, dangling her legs carefreely while turning the pages of Dostoevsky's masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*. Her eyes continued chasing the words on the page even as she answered Kaburagi half-heartedly. "Nothing of particular note..... why do you ask?"

"President Kaneyama mentioned that you seemed a bit off lately, so I thought

I would check in with you and see how things are.”

Baba-Nyan’s hand froze in the middle of turning the next page. “I venture to infer that he was most likely talking about the strange things I did while possessed. Now, I am recovered in full.”

“That’s what I thought too. Sorry for asking a weird question.”

“No, no, I mind it not.”

“What’re you two talking about?”

“Oh, just a little something about Baba-san. President Kaneyama said that he had noticed her being a bit off lately, so I was just asking her about that.”

“Well, she *did* get possessed for quite a while... Baba-san, are you sure you’ve fully recovered?”

“Indeed. As you can see.” While clenching her weak-as-usual fists as a display of her recovered vigor and smiling in response to the concern shown by Touka, who had jumped into the conversation, Baba-Nyan pushed her mind to think quickly. She was 90% sure that what Kaneo Kaneyama had noticed were the things that she had done for the traitor event, especially in light of the extra effort she put in to make them a bit more conspicuous so the students could spot them easier. However, she couldn’t entirely rule out the possibility that he might have caught sight of her filching platinum or tools from the Kaneyama Tech labs or misappropriating parts from PSI drives in the middle of tests. She reminded herself of the need to be even more vigilant going forward, especially against Kaburagi.

The fact was, all the other Amaterasu members were very closely tied to Sago, which made it too dangerous to try pulling anyone into becoming her ally. Additionally, Kaburagi was both sharp-eyed and extremely intelligent, so much so that it took all of Baba’s effort just to avoid making her suspicious.

Another way of looking at the situation was that successfully roping Kaburagi in as an ally would be extremely reassuring, but she was just way too close to Sago. As an aside, the two of them seemed even closer than many married couples were, so Baba could not understand how they weren’t even going out with each other. But in any case, the point was that Kaburagi would be an

extremely reliable ally, but approaching her would be far too risky.

On the other hand, Yasuo Yasui made for a very convenient pawn. Although the ease with which he could be manipulated by money made him outright untrustworthy, he did not possess the guts to do anything overly ambitious, and he was cunning enough to a certain degree. That combination of traits made him the perfect person to use as a gofer who would be satisfied with the fragmented pieces of information that he was drip fed. And in fact, he did pretty good work in return for all the money being transferred into his account.

The way Baba communicated with Yasui was through Morse code. Baba was capable of picking up sounds undetectable to humans. As Sago's telekinetic eavesdropping was fundamentally just an extension of his own five senses, what he couldn't hear in real life, he couldn't hear telekinetically either. Even in spite of that, Baba always made sure to properly disguise it every time she sent Yasui a message, be it pretending to be picking up something she had dropped or pretending to be tapping her earphones along with music. One could say that she was being far too careful, but thanks to all her efforts, Sago and Kaburagi were still completely in the dark.

The PSI drive that Baba had named "Demon Lord Killer" was already completed. She would carry out her plan two days later, at Ama-no-Iwato. At the birthday party that Kaburagi had planned for Sago, everything was going to come to a conclusion———

Chapter 16: You Dared to Trick Me?!

Yasuo Yasui was not the kind of guy who would enjoy another guy's birthday party and offer him well wishes. However, if his honor *and* money was on the line, then that changes everything drastically. Within the cubicle farthest in the back inside a café relatively close to Ama-no-Iwato, Yasui was reporting to his co-conspirator, who was in the middle of drinking apple juice through a straw. "Just as you asked, I've pushed a ton of work onto Kuma-san, so he should be stuck at his desk for the entire night tonight. There's no chance of him interrupting."

"I've also arranged for Ig to stay with a common marmoset breeder in Saitama Prefecture, under the pretense of finding a mate for her. However, I failed to keep Kaburagi away. That woman is just too sharp; take care to not overexert yourself, as she might pick up on it."

That day when Baba suddenly revealed everything about superpowers to Yasui and told him that Kinemitsu Sago was the mastermind behind everything, he had been terribly surprised. Her little girl appearance and the complete lack of context only served to magnify the sense of bewilderment that Yasui felt when she then asked for his cooperation in arresting Sago. However, upon smelling fresh new bills and feeling reassured upon hearing how simple the tasks were that she asked of him, Yasui soon chose to nod in acceptance of her offer. Afterward, the simple orders continued coming, always followed by a generous deposit in his bank account. And now, he had come to place quite a bit of faith in her as a good business partner.

"Those inside the store shall be myself, Shiori Kaburagi, Shouta Takahashi, Touka Hasumi, and Kinemitsu Sago. Us five."

"The handcuffs?"

At Yasui's prompting, Baba-Nyan took out a pair of handcuffs from her chest pocket and slid them toward Yasui. "They work exactly as I've explained. Clamping these onto an esper is akin to sealing their powers. But remain wary

until you do, for Sago's powers are beyond your imagination. Although you shall be catching them off guard in the midst of a party—"

"Don't worry, I got it, I got it. I'm not stupid enough to think of having a frontal face-off with IT."

For someone who has a superpower that is truly so deserving of the word "super" that it could destroy planets and stars, Sago was an extremely ordinary person. When he crashed and burned after splurging on lootboxes in mobile games, he would then rage quit and go to bed sulking. When there was a sale going on, he would happily rush over to buy a whole stock of toilet paper, but then realize that he had nowhere to store them all and end up just giving them away to other people. In short, his mindset was entirely that of a commoner.

And as such, he was extremely weak against the police. Despite having more than enough power to crush not only the entire police force, but the military forces of every single nation on earth, he would shrink into himself when in front of a policeman, like any other commoner would. Therefore, taking advantage of that to get the handcuffs onto him was going to be Yasui's job.

While dreaming of all the honor and acclaim that was almost within his reach, Yasui let out a disgusting-sounding chuckle. The crimes that Sago had committed included blackmailing and manipulating the police force, heading the secret organization responsible for the Super Water Sphere incident, and even being the person behind the World Shadows threatening the world. And he, Yasui, was going to get all the credit for arresting this man. A promotion of several ranks was a no-brainer. He looked forward to bathing in so much praise and recognition that it would make his head go dizzy. Of course, the money that he could gain by taking advantage of all this was going to shoot up by leaps and bounds. After all, setting at the dealing table with yakuza and with foreign intelligence agencies were matters on entirely different dimensions from each other.

"You sure you don't want a split?"

"I desire no such thing. Attaining monetary gain would only taint the taste of revenge."

When Yasui asked one last time in confirmation, Baba-Nyan's face twisted

with rage. Yasui had not heard from her what was it that had happened to make her so infuriated, but he was a person who placed more trust in anger than in uncertain nonsense like love or friendship. Those seeking revenge were easy to control, as long as you went along with their quest for vengeance.

“K then, see you in an hour.”

“Indeed.”

As Yasui stood up and made his leave, Baba-Nyan saw him off with ice-cold eyes.



When it came time, Yasui stepped into Ama-no-Iwato. What first caught his eye was Sago, who was wearing pince-nez glasses and a decorated hat. He was in the middle of cutting a cake, with his usual sour look still on his face. Sago also noticed him immediately.

At that point, the party was in full swing, and Kaburagi’s face was slightly red from wine as Baba-Nyan continuously made sure to keep her glass topped up. Takahashi was holding a bunch of birthday candles together and was just about to light them all on fire, while Hasumi was in the middle of bringing a piece of cake to her mouth.

“Good evening, everyone. Apologies for interrupting your party. I’m a police officer, name’s Yasui.” Yasui’s self-introduction and brandishing of his police ID caused the bewilderment in the air to thicken. Although Yasui was Kumano’s partner, unlike Kumano, Yasui was not so close with the members of the secret organization as to participate as an uninvited walk-in. But that said, he was not a complete stranger either.

Yasui’s shoes sounded unnaturally loud as he walked straight up to Sago—who had taken off his party paraphernalia—and thrust a counterfeit warrant in his face. “Kinemitsu Sago, you are under arrest for the charge of rioting in regards to the Super Water Sphere incident and for the suspicion of being related to the acts of violence perpetrated by black creatures of undetermined origin.”

“Wha—?”

The forging of a warrant was a severe crime. However, Baba had procured and tested the watery remains of many World Shadow remains, and found Sago's DNA from them every single time. In addition, she had also found large fragments of lead in his room that looked like they had been part of a large sphere before. Regardless of whether those test results and lead fragments were the real thing or not, this was more than enough to support a claim for reasonable doubt of a crime. If Kaburagi did not have her hand in the police force, normally this would be enough to get a real warrant issued through the proper channels.

That said, having physical evidence was good and all, but what was even better was a confession. Therefore, Yasui had spent a week forging a fake warrant that looked extremely similar to a real one. As he was in the position to look at real ones for reference, this task was actually quite easy.

Normally, evidence procured through illegal means and gathered outside the perimeters of an official criminal investigation would be inadmissible in court. However, with the matter being what it was, surely something could be done afterward as long as he successfully made the arrest.

"Please hold out both your hands."

"What.....?" Unable to process what was going on, Sago obediently held out both of his hands.

Just as Yasui was about to clamp his handcuffs onto Sago's wrists, Kaburagi leapt up with a pale face. However, immediately afterward she looked extremely shocked, and stared at her hands, whispering, "Why.....?"

"If you're trying to stop time, don't bother. I've mixed a special platinum compound into the wine. For at least the next 3 hours until your metabolism recovers, it'll be extremely difficult to use your superpower. Though with your proficiency, you probably won't be able to use it at all," said Baba-Nyan in a soft, eerie voice.

The two high schoolers became flustered.

"Hold on a... Baba, you can't talk about superpowers in front of a police officer!"

“Mr. Detective, please wait a minute. There’s some sort of misunderstanding here.”

Yasui ignored their words. Finally realizing that he might be in danger, Sago tried to withdraw his hands, but Yasui held onto them firmly, and the handcuffs quickly clicked into place. Sago immediately tried moving his hands, but the handcuffs would not budge. Then he took a deep breath and narrowed his eyes, staring intently at the handcuffs.

Yasui’s heart pounded. *Don’t tell me...?*

However, Yasui’s fears proved unfounded. The handcuffs on Sago’s wrists remained in place, showing no signs of being destroyed. Sago’s face turned into an expression of disbelief. “How could this be.....! With just a simple pair of handcuffs.....?!”

“What has happened to your pretense, Kinemitsu Sago? Or should I say, demon lord?” Putting down the wine bottle in her hand, Baba-Nyan walked forward. Kaburagi moved to stop her, but Yasui got in her way. Without her chronoprohiberis, Kaburagi was but a normal woman.

“Oi oi oi oi, ‘demon lord’? Who, Master? What’re you talking about?”

“Shouta, you possess the right to know the truth. Touka, you as well. Listen well, and listen close.”

“Baba-san.....? Are you possessed again.....?”

“There’s no way. That’s impossible!” Hasumi’s murmur was immediately refuted by Kaburagi.

With a natural motion, Kaburagi removed the strangely bulky barrette that she was wearing. However, after having been informed by Baba-Nyan, Yasui quickly snatched the barrette that was actually a modified foldable-type beretta from her hands. This barrette beretta was actually a firearm that Kaburagi, being the cautious person that she was, always kept on her person in case her superpower ever failed her. The disguise was perfect. If Yasui had not known about it beforehand, she could have shot him when his guard was down. Or at the very least, she could have turned the situation into a stand-off.

However, this hidden ace that no one would be able to see through at first

glance was easily exposed and snatched away. Kaburagi ground her teeth in anger and glared at Baba-Nyan with certainty. “No, she has betrayed us of her own will.”

“I, a betrayer? Nay, I am the betrayed! The gall of you to level such accusations at me after everything that you two have done!”

Takahashi and Hasumi seemed to understand that for some reason, there was a “Kaburagi and Sago” vs “Baba-Nyan and Yasui” stand-off happening at the moment, but it was taking all their mental resources to keep up with the abrupt shift from a happy birthday party to whatever this was.

Kaburagi had declared Baba-Nyan a traitor.

Baba-Nyan was saying that Kaburagi and Sago were the real traitors.

While looking at the two students who were frozen with confusion, Baba-Nyan began talking in broken phrases, seemingly having trouble forming coherent sentences from extreme emotion. “Master, or Sago, he... he’s been pretending to be a non-esper... but the reality is... he is the world’s oldest... and most powerful—”

“Oi, Baba!” Sago had the chain of his handcuffs wrapped around a faucet and was desperately pulling at them, but to no avail. The fretfulness that was usually absent from his voice caused Yasui to smile thinly while enjoying a rush of sadistic euphoria.

“—esper of all, the Boss of Amaterasu himself. Have doubts never crossed your minds? Where is Boss? What is he doing? Why does he always seem aware of the deeds that you had performed? Why does he know your likes and dislikes? Well, wonder no longer, for the answer is simple: he has been there beside you all along!”

“Stop talking! You’re going to destroy everything!”

Unfortunately, those words of rebuke only served to give Baba-Nyan’s words greater credibility. “The appearance of the World Shadows, and the World Shadows attacking humans. Shouta, Touka. Your awakening to your superpowers, and indeed, even the numerous trials and tribulations that have befallen you—”

“Shit, shut up!”

Kaburagi tried to push Yasui back to grab Baba-Nyan, but he utilized a bit of the martial arts that he had learned from Kumano to subdue her and press her against the ground.

“—everything has been the result of Sago’s self-serving actions!”

“SHUUUTTT UUUPPPPPPP!!!!” In accompaniment with Sago’s scream, the handcuffs on his wrists began to vibrate unnaturally. Although they still seemed to be holding, the creak of metal pierced the air, causing Yasui to start having second thoughts.

“O-Oi! Your handcuffs aren’t suppressing him fully!”

“So it seems. In that case.....” Baba stomped the floor hard, at which point a floorboard rotated and a magnificent silver-colored sword that exuded an incredible sense of presence shot out. Baba-Nyan caught it, then directed it toward Sago. “I shall strike him down here, without fail. Worry not, this Demon Lord Slayer is far beyond that which you can endure!”

“.....Wait, what? Hold on hold on hold on h-h-hold on, this is different from what we agreed on!” What Baba-Nyan had told Yasui was that she was going to help him arrest Sago. All the credit laid in ‘arresting the esper behind the Super Water Sphere incident by himself,’ and there was meaning only if he remained alive, whether to remain an experimental subject or to become forced into labor. In contrast, arresting a corpse would be of no meaning whatsoever. Rather, Yasui himself would be in hot water for suspicion of aiding and abetting murder. The whole premise of the agreement between Baba-Nyan and himself was based on taking Sago alive.

“Think not that I have forgotten the deep-seated resentment of having been summoned to this piece of shit world. As if I would forget! And if the hero has already been brainwashed and can’t do the job himself, then I must do the job myself, must I not? Ahh, long have I awaited this moment of revenge!”

Baba-Nyan held her sword in a low stance, then rushed toward Sago. Sago, whose hands were still constrained by the handcuffs, clumsily rolled about on the ground in an attempt to distance himself from her onslaught, but then found his back hitting the wall. He had been cornered. It was clear to everyone

present that the next swing of the sword was finally going to reach him.

Yasui suddenly drew his gun, then shot a warning shot near Baba's feet. The dry pop of the gun heightened the tension in the air even further. "Drop that sword, Lonalia Linalia Baba-Nyan!"

Baba-Nyan shot a sideways glance at Yasui, then scoffed as if in ridicule. That pissed Yasui off, causing him to continue threatening her with his finger still on the trigger of his gun. "I'm serious. I'm arresting you red-handed for the crime of attempted murder. If you don't drop your sword, I'll shoot."

Even while speaking, Yasui quickly did some mental calculation. If he managed to stop Baba-Nyan here, then he could make two arrests in one fell swoop. That would be an even greater achievement than arresting only Sago alone. Baba-Nyan knew what Yasui was doing on the down low, but Yasui also knew that Baba-Nyan was not the little girl that she appeared to be. If he handled this well, he could still turn this unexpected development to his advantage.

"Master, calm down. Baba, you too. More like, everyone, just chill. Or do you all want me to chill your heads for you?"

"Let's talk things over. It wouldn't be too late to draw conclusions after listening to what everybody has to say."

Takahashi shifted into mediation with white frost emitting from his hands, and Hasumi stood up to support him.

However, Baba-Nyan clearly had no intention of listening to them as she once again kicked off against the ground in a lunge toward Sago.

The next second seemed like a tiny slice of eternity, as the world moved in slow motion.

Yasui felt like he was spectating in third-person mode as he felt his finger pressing on the trigger of his gun as if guided by fate. Kaburagi thrashed about while wailing and crying. Fire and ice exploded in between Sago and Baba-Nyan.

Baba-Nyan somehow made it through the mass of elemental energy, and her sword flashed forward like a spear. The same instant that the handcuffs shattered from extreme vibration, Baba's sword pierced Sago's chest at precisely the position of his heart.

Sago's eyes shot wide open, then he roared like a beast as an invisible power dashed Baba-Nyan against the far wall like a rag doll. Blood spewed out of her mouth as her back made forceful impact, then she slid to the ground limply. The sight of her head being turned all the way around to her back and her limbs all being twisted in unbelievable angles spoke volumes as to her ghastly demise.

Sago, too, reached out to grip the sword in his chest with shaking hands, but then fell over as bloody foam came out of his mouth.



While listening to Kaburagi wail at his feet like it was the end of the world, Yasui slowly lowered his still smoking gun, terrified to his core. He had not actually intended to shoot. But his finger had indeed pulled the trigger. Did the bullet land? Did it not?

Baba-Nyan looked like a ragged doll that some child had finished playing with. Clinging to a tiny sliver of hope, Yasui tried to feel for a pulse, but got nothing. “She’s..... dead.....?”

Yasui slowly lurched backward. Was the blood staining Baba-Nyan’s front her own blood that she had vomited out, or was it from a bullet wound that he himself had inflicted? He was too scared to check.

At the same time, Kaburagi scrambled toward Sago’s limp body. She was beyond herself, and crying in great heaving sobs.

Takahashi and Hasumi also made their way over. The former took Sago’s wrist to also feel for a pulse. “Not good, I can’t feel anything! We need Ig—no, she’s not here right now! Shit! Why isn’t she here today of all days!”

“Move over, Shouta. We still don’t know for sure. Let me try his neck, sometimes you can get wrong readings from the wrist.”

Pushing Takahashi aside, Hasumi placed a hand at Sago’s neck. However, she then immediately hung her head.

“You’re right, there’s no pulse. Oh right! Even though Ig isn’t here, we have the healing fuel PSI drives—”

“No we don’t, they were all among the ones that Baba switched out, and we haven’t gotten them back yet!”

“Then an ambulance!”

“Y-Yeah, all right. But.....” Takahashi gnashed his teeth while staring at the pool of blood spreading on the ground. Let alone the aorta, Sago’s heart would have to be punctured for him to have lost so much blood in such a short amount of time. Even in the eyes of a layperson, it was clear that the wound was fatal.

As Hasumi continued desperately fumbling around for a solution, Kaburagi

suddenly shoved her away with eyes red and puffy from crying as she screamed, “Stop touching him! What more are you doing to Sago-san?! How much do you think he.....! Just... get out! Get out already! All of you! Every single one of you!

Murderers!

You’re all murderers!!

Get out, all you murderers!!!”

“A-All right, we’ll take our leave. Come you two, let’s leave her be for a while.”

Already in the middle of backing toward the door, Yasui took advantage of this timing to grab the two students’ hands and drag them toward the door. Thing was, if an ambulance got called over, then everything that had just happened would get blown wide open. Therefore, Yasui was betting on the chance that, as this was a secret organization, with enough time everyone involved would calm down and this incident would also remain a secret. If not, Yasui himself would be doomed, charged with the discharge of his pistol and for homicide. And during the subsequent investigation, his other crimes might get exposed as well. For all these reasons, his most important goal at the moment was to convince the two schoolkids *not* to call an ambulance.

“What are you doi—let go of me!”

“Touka, calm down. I think everybody’s just really confused right now. We’ve got to regain our composure. Dammit, I can’t think straight.”

With the two students in tow, Yasui tried his best to push his paralyzed mind into action while quickly making his escape.

After the three had left, heart-wrenching wailing alone filled the air. There, in the scene of a tragic end highlighted by a spreading pool of blood, the sound of lamentation continued on and on and on and on———



———For all of three minutes, that was.

Abruptly, the elven ears of the fallen Baba-Nyan twitched repeatedly,

confirming that the cast had truly existed the stage. Her bent and twisted limbs slowly rotated back to their normal positions, and her head pivoted 180 degrees back to the front like an owl. She slowly got up, checking her own physical condition. “They’re gone,” she said while spitting out the leftovers of the blood transfusion pack that she had been keeping in her mouth.

Immediately, Kaburagi stopped her fake crying, then stopped time to quickly clean up the clotted blood all over the floor before it got stained. “I’ve finished cleaning. Sago-san, are you all right?”

“Hmm? I can move now?” asked Sago while getting up and pulling out the toy PSI drive that was digging into his chest. Even as it was coming out, the sword’s plastic blade that had been pressed against a spring protracted back out.

“But damn, talk about a close shave. I totally thought I was going to get busted when they mentioned checking the pulse in my neck. Props to Touka-chan for having the presence of mind to check my neck after my wrist.”

“I agree completely. How did you actually pull it off though? I also thought that we were absolutely done for.” Kaburagi placed “The Entertainer” into the record player while tilting her head curiously.

Sago ripped off the large blood transfusion pack stuck to his chest and chucked it into the sink. “I stopped my heart with telekinesis and restarted it again immediately after Touka-chan stopped checking. So that was actually pretty close to a near-death experience for me back there.”

“You actually went that far?!”

“Didn’t Baba stop hers altogether?”

“We Alvu possess from birth the natural ability to stop our own hearts at will. In brief, the construct of our bodies differ greatly from that of humans, and that includes a greater range of motion for our limbs as well. But leaving that topic for another day, here you go. It’s your birthday present.”

So saying, Baba-Nyan went to the spot where she had kicked up the toy PSI drive, then removed a fake layer in the hole to reveal the real Demon Lord Slayer kept inside the secondary compartment. When she handed it over to Sago, his eyes widened. Unlike the plastic sword that had been made just for

looks, this real one exuded graceful artistry in concert with fine relief and detailed craftsmanship. The sense of weight and dignity it emanated was thoroughly overwhelming.

Sago was delighted, while Kaburagi was astounded.

“Whooooaaahhh! This is fricking awesome! Like, seriously awesome! Ohhh.....! Thank you, Baba!!”

“Well I’ll be..... when did you find the time to make something this incredible? I didn’t notice you working on it at all.”

“*Fufufu*, bow before the wisdom of an elder. When a surprise present ceases to be a surprise, does that not take the joy out of it? Pretending to not know about a surprise despite knowing about it, and proceeding with preparing a surprise while unaware that the surprise has already been leaked—both make fools out of those involved. Incidentally, Sago. Be aware that the dial on the guard can be turned to adjust the strength of the feedback damage. It is my wish that you would find this helpful for your training.”

“For real, Baba? You’re the fricking best! This is like the best weapons of both demon lord and hero fused together into the ultimate weapon!”

“What about me? Do you not have something for me? Where’s my wonderful and cute magical wand?”

“Oh, patience. Your birthday is still a ways off, is it not?”

In the middle of excitedly swinging his brand new sword about, Sago suddenly calmed down and turned to Baba, asking, “Making this took a lot of work, didn’t it? But are you sure about this? Aren’t you still quite angry at me?”

“.....So you have noticed.”

“Every once in a while, you look at me with really pained eyes.”

Baba-Nyan smiled bitterly. “Yes, I am angry still. There is hatred within me as well. However, in equal portion is there also gratefulness and respect. Respect does not negate hatred. Opposing emotions can exist in tandem. However, giving form to respect and gratefulness like this is a way to water and nurture the good in my heart while waiting for the evil to wither and shrivel away. This,

too, is a piece of wisdom from an elder.” At that moment, Baba-Nyan’s eyes were filled with an unfathomable amount of affection attainable only after living out an unfathomable number of years.

“Well, regardless, now is the time for a feast. Shouta and Touka had failed to discern my second betrayal, but there is a lesson to be learned there, too.” Baba-Nyan went over to take a seat at the table where Kaburagi had finished making preparations for the set-up team only afterparty, and grabbed a can of apple juice for herself. Similarly, Kaburagi also sat down, and opened a special bottle of wine that she had been saving for special occasions. Upon catching eye contact from the both of them, Sago opened his can of low-malt beer and cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Actually, though there’s still our resurrection event coming up, but for now, I officially announce the conclusion of our traitor event! Thank you both for all your hard work! Cheers!”

““Cheers!””



Epilogue: Walking in the Night

When it comes to events, no matter what it is, there are always 3 ways to enjoy it:

- 1) Before the event: There's the looking forward to it, and the sense of excitement counting down the days to it.
- 2) During the event: It gets busy as heck, but that's what makes it fun.
- 3) After the event: Holding a review party together with the comrades with whom you had gone through all the highs and lows of the event together is super duper fun.

"Honestly speaking, I kinda feel like the second betrayal was a bit harsh, wasn't it? There was no way they could have seen through it, and man did you two see Touka-chan's and Shouta-kun's faces? I just hope we haven't traumatized them."

After we clinked glasses together, I gave voice to my biggest worry. A "this again?" look immediately came over Baba's face. She was in the right, of course, as we had already argued this back and forth at length before starting the event. And obviously, we had arrived at a conclusion, or else we wouldn't have proceeded with it. As so, digging this topic back up at this point in time may have been a bit untoward of me. But even so, it was a worry that I couldn't get out of my head.

"Isn't that why we will be resurrecting you two soon, so as to lessen the intensity of any possible trauma? By quickly overwriting a failure experience with a success experience in short order, the blow to their psyche would be kept to a minimum. You two might have died, but you'll be back, so in the long run everything's still fine. I've already gone over this psychological technique many times, Sago-san."

"That may be so, but I'm not talking about the technical stuff right now. It's more like, was there really need for a second betrayal? Feels kind of like we

were delivering a finishing blow hot on the heels of the previous one.”

The traitor event this time was Baba’s brainchild. It was also her who suggested the two consecutive betrayals. The first one would be a simple betrayal. Figuring it out would be easy, and the solution would also be easy. Then the second one would be a deep betrayal. Figuring it out would be extremely difficult, and the solution would also be extremely difficult. The question we wanted to ask was, would they be able to utilize what they’d learned from the first to deal with the second? The second one was a test, but was also meant as an example of a dilemma that does not fall neatly under the paradigm of good and evil dualism.

In this world, things don’t end after pointing at someone and saying, “He’s the enemy!” or “That guy’s evil!” Things rarely get resolved cleanly with just defeating someone and getting a “The End” screen.

During the second betrayal, Baba tried to kill me while refusing to engage in conversation. Between Baba and me, who was in the wrong? There wasn’t enough time or information to make a call. It was impossible to tell who was evil and who was just. Within such a dilemma where there was no “correct” answer to be found, Shouta-kun and Touka-chan had to make their own call, and do what it would take to stop what had devolved into a fight to the death. To make matters worse, the outcome of their actions would have a direct effect on two people that they were close with.

Honestly, I think this would be a hard call for even adults to make. If I was in their shoes, I would cry. While crying, I would beg and plead for both parties to stand down. I wouldn’t even have the presence of mind to use telekinesis to suppress both people or make any other calm decisions.

If I had to evaluate whether this was a good experience for the two high schoolers from the viewpoint of their mental growth, then the answer would probably be “yes.” Now, if they had caught on beforehand, or successfully stopped me and Baba from killing each other, then they would have gotten 100 points, full marks. But even though they had failed, letting Baba and me die, we would resurrect soon afterward, taking the edge off the bite of this failure.

Another way of looking at this was a nightmare-level trial with a safety net. In

normal everyday life, one very rarely comes upon an extreme situation where other people's lives are at stake. And it's not really something that could be found by looking. The fact that the two students had just gone through one such experience was sure to leave a great impact on their lives going forward.

But then that's where I thought, "Was there really a need to make them go through something like this?" Normal Japanese citizens would not encounter such experiences even once throughout the entirety of their normal lives. Has anyone ever said "Because of my first experience in an extreme situation with lives at stake, I was able to get through my second experience in an extreme situation with lives at stake"? Probably not, right? After all, this was real life that we were talking about. Real life grounded in a reality with an established reputation of peacefulness and humdrum. Let alone once, to encounter two such occurrences? It was nigh impossible.

So I'll say it again. This was surely a very precious experience. Overcoming it would mean enormous growth in what it means to be human. However, was it truly necessary to force this kind of growth? There was no need to become an amazing human. Simply not becoming a bad human would be more than enough. What I wanted was to let Shouta-kun and Touka-chan enjoy a fulfilling adolescence and be happy. But then there we were, forcing a trial upon them and gouging their hearts with a traumatic experience.

The sight of me looking worried caused Baba to sniff in exasperation. "Those who know only happiness and success are brittle. They turn into clowns, forever trapped by an inability to understand the feelings of those undergoing hardships and failure. Sago, do you want Shouta and Touka to become those deplorable success stories who belittle those who fail as not having poured in enough effort or passion?"

"But even so, is that enough of a reason to purposely set them to fail? In the first place, Shouta already has experience with failure from his unwinnable fight, and Touka-chan had been a target of malicious bullying all the way up to her second year in middle school."

Even without the finishing blow from another traitor event hot on the heels of the first, the two of them already had experience with setback. They were not the kind of kids who would laugh at someone else's failure.

“You truly are soft on those two, Sago. Allow me to repeat what I had said before: after overcoming difficulties and learning to make compromises, they can eventually laugh about this when they become adults. Only by including this can their adolescence be said to have been fulfilling. Is this not the ‘tears’ part of the laughter and tears that you believe to be so crucial to this ‘fulfilling adolescence’ that you spoke of?”

“Well I mean, yeah, but..... when I saw the look on their faces, I just felt this massive wave of guilt rising up. Well what do you think about this, Kaburagi-san?”

Upon having the conversation directed to her, Kaburagi-san replied matter-of-factly while still elegantly swirling her glass of wine. “It seems to me there’s no point in theorizing about the ‘what-if’s of not doing something after having already done it.”

“You’re so right about that that I have nothing at all to say as comeback. Baba, sorry. I’ve wasted your time with meaningless talk.”

“I mind it not. To be frank, I confess that I also feel a little like I had taken the axe to a young sapling. Let us reflect and carry forward the lessons we’ve learned. I am changing the topic here, but was not the setting that I didn’t know anything about fingerprints too much of a stretch?”

“You think so? But it’s about another world, so it wouldn’t be strange if that was actually true.” Kaburagi tilted her head in response to Baba’s question.

I also expressed my agreement while using telekinesis to crush the remains of the handcuffs into a metal sphere and throw it into the recycling bin for metals. “After all, it’s another world different from our own. If you apply the same lens again, then handcuffs that can seal superpowers and dissolvable platinum compounds are also quite unbelievable. Even the fact that something that amplifies superpowers—platinum—can be used also to seal those powers seems illogical. These handcuffs are not even platinum but just normal silver, and the so-called platinum compound was just sugar, right? But by continuously insisting on these lies, they gain credibility. After all, this is all logic from another world.”

“This might be hard to believe for you, Baba, as your world has even attained

the technological prowess to even cross worlds at will. However, most Earthlings generally believe that ‘anything can happen in other worlds.’ No matter how mysterious or bizarre something is, as long as it is credibly explained as ‘from another world,’ then no one would bat an eye.”

“Is that how things are?” Baba still looked not quite convinced, but this was a difference in the culture between different worlds, and as such was not something that could be explained fully through logic. *Please forgive us ignorant Earthlings.*

Next, I opened my second can of low-malt beer, then moved the conversation along to each of our personal favorite moments of the event. “For me, my favorite part was the surprise birthday present. But the funniest part was, well, y’know, Baba’s cheating. You were reading *Crime and Punishment* to give the students a hint as to the second betrayal, right? But those handwritten notes on the pages, aren’t they your scripted lines in your mother tongue? You and your brazen cheating, seriously. I almost burst out laughing when I realized it!”

“You wish to point your finger at me, do you? And yet did you not also do the same with telekinesis, and Kaburagi with her chronoprohiberis?” laughed Baba in response. Seeing as how Kaburagi was poking at her potato salad with a straight face without showing any intention of denying the accusation, clearly she had also been cheating in her own way.

In other words, all of us had been cheating with a straight face right in front of Touka-chan’s and Shouta-kun’s noses. Thanks to that, we were able to focus on our performance without worrying about memorizing the lines, but this was still quite dreadful in its own way. *Seriously, how am I supposed to not laugh?*

“As for me, and this isn’t exactly what I thought the most interesting, but the part that was most memorable for me was when the police barged in.”

“Ahh, I totally get you.”

“Peace! Good one.”

As Kaburagi spoke while separating her potato salad, Baba and I both nodded deeply in sympathy. After all, the police duo really did stir up our traitor event quite significantly.

“But well, in the end we managed to pull Kuma-san over to our side, and we also have a collar on Yasui thanks to the great job Baba did digging that trap for him. Hasn’t everything come to a rather satisfying conclusion?”

“What dignity would I have remaining if I had failed after even going so far as to cry like a child?”

“MOOOMMYYYY!!”

“*Mpft!* No, stop that.”

When I did a voice impression of Baba’s crying, Kaburagi spat out a little bit of her wine in a not entirely successful attempt to hold back her laughter. As she hunched over, quivering with suppressed laughter, Baba stroked her back and repeated “MOMMYYYY!” right next to her ear. Immediately, Kaburagi lost control and totally choked. *What are you delivering a finishing blow on her for, Baba! You sure like this joke, don’t you!*

“So Baba, what about you? What was the part you thought the most interesting or fun?”

Seeing mischievous little Baba continue to whisper in Kaburagi-san’s ear in an apparent attempt to kill her with laughter, I directed the conversation to her. That prompted her to stop and think for a bit.

“I have several, truth be told. Firstly, I had trouble suppressing my laughter after successfully convincing Yasui of the importance of the party crackers to Sago’s arrest and exhorting him to purchase them in bulk and with the ‘utmost urgency.’”

“Eh, seriously? Detective Dirtbag was the one who bought the party crackers?” *Ahhh, that explains why we have so many of them that there are still entire cardboard boxes of unused ones just sitting in the hallway. But poor guy, being made to buy party goods in full seriousness while fully believing them necessary for ‘the plan.’ More like, hasn’t Baba played with him a bit too much? I bet that she’s made him do a ton of other nonsensical fetch missions while turning his head all around with random credible-sounding excuses, hasn’t she?*

“Another scene of note would be when Sago used telekinesis to force Yasui to fire his gun, as well as the unexpectedness and comical erroneousness of

Kaneyama's betrayal..... Ahh right, but that time when Kaburagi doubted in seriousness whether I had any intentions of bringing harm to Sago did make me a touch sad. My question truly was posed in sheer curiosity."

"Ahh, you could tell? Sorry for doubting you. I thought I did a really good job hiding it though."

"Kaburagi-san.....?"

"Sago, pay it no mind. All you need to know is that Kaburagi is vigilant where you are lax."

What does that mean.....? But she said to pay it no mind, so oh well.

"By the way, this just occurred to me, but....."

"Yes?"

"What is it?"

"The blood on my clothes has dried and caked and it feels awful. How about we call it a night and get into some fresh clothes?"

Prompted by my words, Baba looked down at her own bloodsoaked clothes, and Kaburagi-san's face also turned severe from checking out the dark red splodges on her dress that she had gotten from when she had clung to me. Without any further ado, we decided to disband immediately. *A shower sounds wonderful.*

After that, the night passed. Yasui moved exactly as Baba had predicted, successfully managing to convince the two students to not report the incident to the police. And through Kaburagi-san, the kids—whose heads were still in a complete mess from the shocking and rapidly changing developments from yesterday—were told of the "real truth."

Kinemitsu Sago was indeed both the Master of Ama-no-Iwato and the Boss of the secret organization Amaterasu. After awakening to his superpower at a certain point in the past, he then applied himself to self-training. One day, he realized the existence of the World Shadows. At the time, the Shadows were still extremely weak, to the degree where even normal children could repel them. However, there was no doubt that they were a threat. Therefore, Sago

attempted to erase them entirely from this world with his superpower.

However, he failed. Instead, his power ended up channeling back into the World Shadows, which strengthened them instead of annihilating them. After having established this connection with them, Sago gained the ability to sense whenever a new one appeared. He then rushed all about, scrambling to make amends due to the sense of responsibility he felt for having strengthened the World Shadows.

World Shadows were fundamentally the materialization of people's desire for power. Therefore, when Sago's power flowed into the World Shadows, a tiny trickle of that power backchanneled into the connections that World Shadows already had with all humans. That was why other people also began awakening to their own superpowers.

Among one of those who awakened in such a way was Shiori Kaburagi. Sago found her just when she was struggling with coming to terms with her newfound ability. After helping her out, the two of them decided together to found the secret organization Amaterasu. However, by then, the weight of the guilt of having strengthened the World Shadows had already taken its toll on Sago, turning him into a reticent and sour-faced person.

Additionally, the reason why he hid his identity as Boss from Shouta and Touka was because that was his way of protecting his "ordinary days." The concept that "those who can't protect their ordinary days can't protect the rest of the world's ordinary days" applied equally to him as well. Rather, it could be said that he was the one who needed those words the most.

Even though the situation was entirely due to his failure at wiping out the World Shadows, and even though it could be said that he was merely getting what he deserved for the hubris that drove him to attempt such an absurd feat, continuously spreading his telekinesis all over the world to kill off World Shadows was extremely tiring. His mind was slowly being whittled down.

Sago yearned for the guileless ordinary days that he had lost. He dreamed of being an ordinary person who didn't possess a superpower and who couldn't fight against World Shadows, an ordinary person living ordinary days like most other people all around. And so for him, his face as the bar master of Ama-no-

Iwato became his ordinary self. It became something that he wanted to protect at all costs.

It was this modest and unassuming lie that Baba had noticed, been outraged by, and worked to destroy.

However, that was not the end of this tragic tale.

After exhausting herself from crying, Kaburagi covered both bodies with a cloth and stepped away for about thirty minutes. When she returned, both of them were gone. Instead, there were two set of bloody footprints heading out the door and into the night.

Kaburagi was able to draw conjectures based on what she knew about the both of them.

On one hand, Sago had an inexplicable bond with the World Shadows. As long as the Shadows remained, perhaps that bond would keep him alive, even resurrecting him when needed. The World Shadows keep Sago alive, and Sago keeps the World Shadows alive. The relationship of coexistence between them was a Gordian knot that could not be untangled. What with something normally so unrealistic as superpowers actually being real, bizarre phenomenon like this could very well be real as well.

The question that remained, then, was “if he had really been resurrected, then why did he leave Ama-no-Iwato?” Kaburagi had no way of confirming, but she suspected that just as Sago’s power had flowed into the World Shadows in the past, perhaps something of the World Shadows had also flowed into Sago as he was being resurrected by them. Probably that had been the reason why he left, though unfortunately Kaburagi was unable to draw any more specific inferences.

On the other hand, the explanation for why Baba—who had no connection to the World Shadows and did not even possess a superpower—could walk was plain and simple: automatic resurrection magic. Although it was the truth that she couldn’t use magic on Earth, before coming over she had a spell cast on her that would automatically resurrect her upon death. It was an anti-crisis measure that could only be used once. Though there were doubts whether it would even activate properly on this magic-less Earth, the fact that her body

had disappeared was strong circumstantial evidence that those fears had been unfounded.

However, there was a problem with that resurrection magic. To get straight to the point, it causes the person being resurrected to lose the previous year's memories. In Baba's case, as her time on Earth was still under a year, she must have woken up to find herself in an underground room that looked nothing like her home world. What with all the blood on her clothes, it wouldn't be too difficult to realize that she had died once and been brought back by the spell. Despite knowing nothing about her current circumstances, simple logic would tell her that it was a good idea to first get away from this place where she had already been exposed to danger once before. After all, the resurrection magic was a one-time use, which meant she had already lost her safety net.

The above was the full "truth" behind the traitor event. After listening to it all, Shouta-kun looked very relieved that Baba and I were apparently still alive. But in contrast, Touka-chan had a grim look on her face.

One must not forget, but Buddhism (warped though it may be) was at the core of Touka-chan's identity. Me having died and come back, from her perspective, meant nothing other than that I had failed to pass on into samsara, the natural cycle of death and rebirth. By definition, that made me an evil spirit who was still wandering the earth when I wasn't supposed to. Consequently, she declared in no uncertain terms, "It makes me sad, but if I ever find Master, I'll help him pass on so that he can return to join samsara."

Um, please don't?

As Touka-chan was usually all "life is important!", we had thought she would accept this cover story quite readily, but our expectations had fallen through in spectacular manner. Of course, we couldn't just leave her like that, which meant a certain degree of mental support or justification was going to be needed.

But speaking of unexpected, the same could be said of Kuma-san's reaction. To our astonishment, he quit the police force, apparently motivated from the regret he felt from not having been present when he was needed most. After discussing it with Kaburagi-san, it was decided that he was going to take up the

mantle of being the 2nd generation Master of Ama-no-Iwato. When he put it like “I want to protect this store and keep it open, in the hope that Sago returns one day,” then how could we say no? Oh, and he agreed to take care of Ig too.

Kuma-san’s manliness and consideration was heartbreaking. Then the fact that with his grim face and stoic aura, he made for a better bar master than I did made things doubly heartbreaking. He himself said that his intention was to protect my place for me—which I was very touched to hear—but I was slightly afraid that he might end up taking my place entirely.

As a non-esper affiliated with a secret organization, as a master martial artist, as the bar master of a bar, and as the wielder of a pair of PSI drive gloves, even if he had not been aiming for it, Kuma-san was totally living out the dreams that he had been nursing for many a decade.

Whereas on the one hand, we saw Kuma-san quitting his job, on the other hand, the shackles that Baba had set in place worked like a charm in shackling Detective Dirtbag to Amaterasu to serve as our new pipeline into the police force. Of course, he had not been informed of Baba’s and my resurrection, and so was still under the misconception that he had been involved in the murder of two people. Although he did have to write a mountain of explanatory reports for having fired his gun twice, Kaburagi-san applied pressure on his higher-ups and helped him get off the hook without any serious repercussions. This, too, left him in great debt to us.

Although Detective Dirtbag had nowhere near the amount of influence within the force that Kuma-san had, he still had a certain amount of say as the person who had been appointed to succeed Kuma-san’s position as the lead investigator in the task force assigned to investigate espers. What with being “advised” by Kuma-san to fully cooperate with Amaterasu, and having connections to the yakuza and not being averse to dirty work, things eventually settled down with Detective Dirtbag becoming a rather convenient external cooperator for the organization.

Furthermore, because of his position as the head of our partner company, President Kaneyama was also informed of Baba’s betrayal. The response that came back from him was “That guy promised that he would make Shiori-san happy even if he had to exchange his life for it, so I’m sure he’ll be back.” /

mean, yeah sure, I do plan to come back eventually, but that... isn't exactly the reason for it. Not that I'd refute it out loud, but, yeah..... As always, he's a weird man who seems to see through the true state of things and yet is still spinning his own wheels.

So with all that settled, Amaterasu was going to have to continue running for a while with both Baba and myself out of the loop. Although a lot had happened indeed, it was our hope that Touka-chan and Shouta-kun would go on to enjoy the high school arc of their secret organization battle story.



Touka Hasumi, a first-year high school student, was walking around the streets at night in a casual outfit coordinated with a cardigan and culotte skirt. She was on her way home after having stopped by Ama-no-Iwato after school.

Although the rainy season was right around the corner, the night air was still a bit chilly on the skin. However, Hasumi's heart was actually even colder than her skin at the moment.

Three days after the traitor incident, Kaburagi and Takahashi seemed to have accepted Sago's and Baba's death and resurrection and were beginning to get back on their feet. In contrast, as the sole person unable to do the same, Hasumi had been in the dumps ever since. There were more and more bouts of her zoning out and losing herself in her thoughts. It had gotten so bad that her parents were actually starting to get worried.

She understood that life would continue on regardless of what happened. She knew that she couldn't just remain depressed and that she had to pull herself back together. But she just couldn't bring herself to do so.

As Hasumi turned onto a deserted, narrow path that was a shortcut home, she noticed someone walking toward her from the opposite end. The moment she made out the person's features, she sucked in a sharp breath. That person, who was wearing jeans and a dress shirt with the top button undone, looked like the spitting image of Kinemitsu Sago.

"Excuse me, please hold on."

"Yeah?"

Upon being addressed, the man stopped with a baffled look on his face. The lack of recognition in his eyes caused Hasumi to doubt herself. *Is he someone else entirely?*

“I’m sorry if I’m being rude, but can you tell me what is your name?”

“Wut? Why should I?”

Hasumi faltered at the casual response that seemed so incongruous with the reticent Master that she knew so well. This man was also displaying a wealth of different facial expressions, and seemed open and frank.

“No, it’s just that you look really similar to someone I know.”

“Oookay? Ah why not. My name’s Yaku.”

Relief and disappointment washed over Hasumi in equal measure as she became even surer that he might just be an accidental resemblance. With that said, however, he really did bear an extremely uncanny resemblance to Sago. Just to be sure, Hasumi pressed, “What about your last name?”

“Mm~mmm, funny you should ask that. Thing is, I actually don’t remember. Amnesia, they told me. To be honest with you, I didn’t remember my first name either; ‘Yaku’ is just a random one I picked to get by. Oh, but please spare me the police, yeah? It’s not like I’m having trouble getting by just because I lost my memory, after all.”

“.....Could it be that the memories you’ve lost are from 3 days ago and before?”

“Whoa, that’s freaky, girl. How’d you know? Wait, did we know each other? Or are you an esper?”

The sight of Yaku being surprised for real fully convinced Hasumi that he was indeed Kinemitsu Sago without his memories.

Hasumi had declared that the moment she found Master, she would help him pass on into the cycle of samsara. In accordance, she was just about to conjure her flames to purify this evil spirit that was unnaturally clinging onto the mortal plane in defiance of the natural order when—

“Why’re you crying?”

“What.....?”

—just as Yaku had pointed out, she realized that there were tears flowing down her cheeks.

This was no time to be crying. She had to return this walking corpse to the realm of the dead. However, no matter how strongly she told herself that, her body seemed controlled by another, much more powerful emotion which was preventing her from moving. Her flames wouldn't come to her.

“Did something sad happen? Um... oh, right, uh, need a handkerchief?” asked Yaku while hesitantly proffering a handkerchief. Through that clumsy gesture of kindness, Hasumi saw a shadow of Master that had apparently remained even through the memory loss. It was the last straw. She could no longer control her crying after that.

“That's... not it. I'm happy... even though I shouldn't... be happy... To think that I would be so happy... to know that Master is still alive... I... I just.....!”

Hasumi was thoroughly mortified at her immature self. She was mortified at how happy she was about an ungodly entity whose very existence was unforgivable by nature of its deviance from the natural cycle of life.

However, if this was an indication of immaturity, then she wanted to remain immature the rest of her life.

Yaku seemed much more carefree and happy than the Master that Hasumi knew. To know his past was to suffer the fate he had before, and Hasumi could not bring herself to be the one to damn him to it. Surely there were things that were best left forgotten. Hasumi wanted, from the bottom of her heart, for the kind and clumsy Master to have his shot at becoming happy. Though admittedly, Ama-no-Iwato was going to feel extremely lonely without him.

After wiping away her tears and calming down, Hasumi had the smile of a Buddha on her face as she asked, “Yaku-san, are you enjoying life right now?”

“Uh, seriously, what's with all the weird questions..... Well I mean, sure, I guess. You probably won't get what I'm saying, but for some reason it feels like something really heavy has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“I get it.”

“You really do?”

“I really do.”

Yaku blinked in response to Hasumi’s firm reply.

Since he was happy and satisfied with his current life, then there was nothing more for Hasumi to say. Of course, if she was being entirely honest, then she would want him to return to Ama-no-Iwato. However, Sago had been beating himself up with guilt and shouldering the burden of fighting against the World Shadows for a long, long time already. He deserved a rest.

Hasumi thought that the longer she dawdled, the harder she would find it to part with him. So she gathered herself to ask only one last question. “Yaku-san, would you happen to know a little girl with silver hair and pointy ears?”

“Okay, whoa, no, now you’re actually really freaking me out. Yes she’s with me, but how’d you know? What do you know about me?”

“*Fufu*, I’m an esper, after all. Please don’t mind me. However, if you ever find yourself in trouble or in need of a helping hand, come to this place called Ama-no-Iwato. Me and everyone there will always be ready to welcome you with all our hearts. I’ll be off now.”

Hasumi handed Yaku a business card with the address of Ama-no-Iwato written on it, then turned to walk off once more into the night, leaving a bewildered Yaku staring at her back.

She never turned back again after that. Not even once.



Special Files: Head of the Super Water Sphere Incident Investigative HQ, Special Intelligence Agent Nicolas Stallone of CIA Japan

Nicolas Stallone was an agent belonging to America's Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, who was currently undercover in Japan. He was in the country under the guise of being an agent chasing an international fugitive, but his real identity was that of the head of the special investigative HQ that had been set up in Japan dedicated specifically to investigating the Super Water Sphere Incident. He was a highly capable asset who had proved himself with crucial contributions that led to the resolution of numerous extremely bizarre cases back in his home country. It was because of expectations that he would somehow replicate his success yet again that he had been assigned his current position.

Within the investigative headquarters—which was located in a certain building behind a certain station in Tokyo that had been completely bought out—today, too, Agent Nicolas was having a staring match with his computer with his arms crossed. It was no easy feat discerning traces of supernatural power usage from the seemingly random jumble of data on the screen. However, Agent Nicolas was more than capable of doing so.

“Excuse me, sir. We have letters.”

One of his subordinates walked into his office with several envelopes in hand, breaking Agent Nicolas' concentration. In this highly advanced information society, the connectedness of everything was what actually made old-fashioned pen and paper that much more useful. In order to find out what's written on a piece of paper, there's no other way than to directly steal it. After all, it didn't matter how brilliant a hacker is, there's just no way to hack or send a virus to a physical letter.

While rotating his shoulders to work out the knots in them, Agent Nicolas asked, “Any strange ones?”

“No, sir. Three are invoices with this address indicated. One that’s a flyer for a sports club that recently opened up nearby. Oh, sorry I take back what I said; this one looks quite interesting. The sender is..... Ugongo Wa Pepo? The postmark is from the Republic of South Africa. You have acquaintances living in South Africa, sir?”

“Not really, I don’t,” answered Agent Nicolas while accepting the whole stack of envelopes. Then the clock caught his eye. “Oh hey, look at the time. Isn’t it time for lunch? Don’t let me keep you, go on ahead and take your break. Thanks for bringing these over.” With a word of thanks and a little prompting, the subordinate soon left the room. After seeing him off, Agent Nicolas immediately locked the door behind him and closed the blinds on his windows. Then he opened the envelope from “Ugongo Wa Pepo” and shined a black light at the writing paper found inside.

Just as he had said earlier, Agent Nicolas really had never met anyone named Ugongo Wa Pepo before. However, letters sent under enigmatic three-word names... that he recognized. After all, this was the secret indicator for a top-secret missive sent from the CIA higher ups. In reaction to the black light, the real contents of the correspondence showed up in between the lines of camouflage text printed with normal black ink. Although the setup was simple, it was effective. Even in the off chance that this letter fell into someone else’s hands, the large majority of people wouldn’t even think to suspect the instructions displayed in normal visible ink of being mere cover-up.

The directive read as follows, “The well-coordinated activities of the espers give credence to the suspicion of them having a support organization. Moreover, the inference is that this organization and the espers are in a mutually beneficial relationship. Dig into the organizations that had seen abrupt growth in the past few years. The list is as follows: the religious organization Koujin-kai; the criminal organization officially acknowledged by the Japanese government, Tanioka-gumi; the charity school MSK; Kaneyama Tech Co., Ltd.; Guroneko Yamato—”

In the first place, it was Agent Nicolas who had first pointed out the possibility of the espers having a support organization. This was his higher-ups acknowledging that conjecture and listing organizations that fit the criteria and

sending them to him as operational orders.

In most cases, investigation was a very dull and time-consuming process. Making big breakthroughs with forensics or deduction occurred only extremely rarely. No, most of the time it was a matter of taking a ton of shots into the dark and hoping something would stick. There were times when they came up with nothing even after thoroughly exhausting all the leads they had. In the same vein, whether or not they could uncover the espers by going through the list that had been sent was very much touch and go.

That said, they were going to go through it, of course. After all, the point was to exhaust every possibility one by one.

Agent Nicolas burned the missive in an ashtray, making sure that there were no eligible fragments left. He then threw the invoices into a drawer and chucked the sports club flyer into the bin. Without thinking much of it, he picked up the last letter—and took a sharp intake of breath.

The name of the sender written on the cutesy pink envelope that had been sent through air mail read “Emma Stallone.” It was the name of the daughter that he was estranged from.

Now, there was no doubting that America was a major superpower, and the CIA was the prided intelligence agency of that superpower. Pursuing the same train of thought, the Super Water Sphere Incident was undoubtedly the most high profile case currently being investigated by the CIA, and Agent Nicolas was the man who had been left in charge of the task force that had been set up in Tokyo for the sole purpose of looking into this incident. When putting all of the above together, it could possibly be argued that Agent Nicolas was *the* biggest intelligence agent in the whole world.

But with that said, this man was hardly the very model of absolute perfection. Yes, he possessed an unparalleled ability to resolve extremely bizarre and difficult cases that fall off the beaten path. However, he had an enormous drinking problem. Conducting investigations while intoxicated, leaking top-secret information, allowing criminals to slip through his fingers, and causing substantial collateral damage were but only a few of the more prominent examples that marred his record.

His contributions had been so significant that the CIA had still entrusted him with the Super Water Sphere Incident investigation in spite of everything else. But unfortunately, his family did not share the same considerations as the CIA. Due to the discontent that had been accumulating over the years in relation to his drinking habit, and with his transfer to Japan acting as the trigger, Agent Nicolas had gotten divorced eight years ago. His wife had won custody over their only child, and he had not seen either of them since.

The letter currently in Agent Nicolas' hands was apparently from that very same daughter. His shaking hands opened the envelope as carefully as if handling glass, eventually pulling out a piece of paper that was apparently an invitation to a birthday party written out in childish handwriting.

Agent Nicolas read through the letter three whole times, then nodded decisively. He picked up a red pen and proceeded to X out entire days on the calendar hanging on his wall, almost as if all the plans and schedules that filled those boxes to bursting had ceased to hold any more meaning to him. Then he excitedly went to his computer to book a plane ticket.

Throwing off all the protests from his subordinates, Agent Nicolas finally stepped onto his home soil for the first time in eight years... and his body was frozen stiff with nerves.

Thinking about it logically, he was only going to see his daughter, so what need was there to be nervous? He had even been sent an invitation. It was as simple as just making his way over and seeing her. Or so he repeatedly told himself, but his hands would not stop shaking.

The last time he saw his daughter, it was when she had only begun to speak. Would she still recognize his face? Would she be disappointed the moment she saw him? Could he be a papa who could live up to her expectations?

Unable to bear it any longer, Agent Nicolas went to the closest supermarket, where he bought and drank enough beer to drown himself in. Only after that did his nerves settle back down.

Alcohol had always helped him clear his head. But unfortunately, at times it would work too well and end up clearing his head entirely.



Upon ringing the bell at his former home, Agent Nicolas' former wife Sarah came out with a smile. However, that face immediately turned grave the moment she laid eyes on him. "What are you doing here?"

"Because I received an invitation from Emma, of course."

When Nicolas waved the letter in her face, she snatched it, read it, then sighed. "So that girl has learned how to send letters already..... And who'd have thought that CIA agents could receive letters....."

"Didn't I tell you before? I can't send them, but there's no problem receiving them. So Emma sent this without telling you?"

"That's right. So turn around and leave right now. Emma thinks that you are a cool CIA agent, all right? The sight of this drunken middle-aged mess that you are would only disappoint her. You really haven't changed a bit since our divorce, have you."

"Jeez, thanks for that. Oh hey, Emma! Thank you for your invitation! Papa is here!"

"Papa?!"

Suddenly spotting his daughter coming into view over Sarah's shoulder, Nicolas called out to her with a full-faced smile. Immediately, Emma lit up like a lamp and rushed over in a half-run. Sarah covered her eyes with one hand and sighed heavily.

"Papa! I'm 10 years old now!"

"Ohh, that's amazing! You're 27 years younger than Papa!"

Nicolas hoisted her up and spun her in the air, and her bright peals of laughter reverberated all around. Emma had apparently taken after her mother with characteristically Caucasian features that included a high nose, white skin, and silk-like blond hair. Her black eyes were pretty much the only indication that she was a quarter Japanese.

"I'm going to be a spy one day like Papa! Oh, wait! I made something for you, I'll bring it down!"

The instant Nicolas let her back down onto firm ground, she shot off like a

rocket toward the second floor. Sarah saw her off with a heartwarming smile while murmuring just loud enough for her ex-husband to hear, “Emma loves making things. Her favorite theme is spy tools for you to use.”

“Really? What a reliable little trooper!”

“I’m thinking of teaching her to make a breathalyzer. What do you think?”

“Whoa, that’s not even funny. Don’t worry, I’m not drunk today.”

“Is that your ‘anything less than 3 beers doesn’t count as drinking’ thing?”

“Yeah, that. Yeah.”

“I have no words. I’m seriously begging you here, don’t make a commotion today, and don’t try anything weird. It’s Emma’s birthday, all right?”

“I know, I know,” returned Nicolas while using his fingers to pick up a piece of roast beef from the food table and throw it into his mouth. Sarah made a quick, silent prayer.

“Here you go, Papa! Look at this, look at this! You can use it to defeat the bad guys!” Thundering down the stairs, Emma thrust an ordinary-looking ballpoint pen at Nicolas. He shot a sideways look at his ex-wife, who shrugged her shoulders without saying anything.

“Whoa, what an amazing gadget! How do you use this, Professor? Can you teach Papa?”

“Sure! Look, you press here—” In close quarters, Emma pressed a button on the pen. Abruptly, red-colored liquid shot out from the tip, landing squarely on his face. It was a miracle that he managed to close his eyes in time.

“.....So yeah, it shoots out super spicy Tabasco sauce. Um, I’m sorry.....”

“As expected of Prof. Mechanic. You’re lucky Papa wasn’t a bad guy, or he would have been done in from that single attack..... Sarah, Sarah, can you bring me something to wipe my face with? It feels like it’s on fire..... all right. Emma, for your birthday present, Papa—”

After wiping off his face with the napkins that he asked for in a small voice, Nicolas was about to give Emma a present in return when he suddenly realized that the only things in his pockets were his wallet, a pack of Skittles, and a

bottle of Spirytus.

“—will show you a cool performance. You’ve gotta be able to do this if you wanna be a spy, so watch closely, all right?”

Somehow managing a save at the very last moment, Nicolas then abruptly headed over to pick up all six steak knives lying on the food table and began juggling them.

Emma and the other kids who had come for her party raised squeals of delight, but the adults who were accompanying the children all went pale in the face. After all, a strange man who had an unsteady gait obviously due to being dead drunk was messing about with steak knives. Who could blame them for being alarmed?

“There, there, and there!”

Nicolas then switched gears. One by one, he snatched the knives out of midair and threw them. The balloons decorating the room popped one after the other, with the window behind them gaining a web of cracks accordingly. The last knife burst the largest balloon in the room, then landed smack dab in the middle of the TV screen after barely grazing Sarah’s cheek on the way.

“Thank you, thank you!”

The children erupted with cheers and whistling and applause. Emma, too, numbered among them. The hand that Nicolas raised to respond to their approbation was almost instantly grabbed by Sarah with the strength of a thousand demons. While maintaining a smile on her face, she then proceeded to forcefully drag Nicolas to the front door, where she threw him outside.

“Oi, oi, aren’t you overreacting a bit too much? It was just a little performance.”

“‘Just a little’? I said earlier that you haven’t changed a bit, but I take that back. You’ve gotten even worse than before. Don’t you ever come back here again. Your very presence puts our lives in danger.”

Then the door slammed firmly right in front of Nicolas’ dumbfounded face.

Eventually, Agent Nicolas sulkily plodded over to a nearby park and fell asleep

on a bench. Some time during the night, he got woken up by the police, so then he returned to Japan in a depressed mood. Once again, he had made a big mess of his life because of alcohol. He hated himself for never learning his lesson. His only solace was the fact that Emma had apparently taken a liking to him.

It really was high time to distance himself from alcohol. If he did, then could he become an upright man who could not only be a great papa to his daughter, but also a great husband to his wife? Agent Nicolas reflected deeply, and swore upon the modified ballpoint pen that he had received from Emma to never touch alcohol again.

In total, it was his 420th time vowing to go sober.

After listening left-ear-in-right-ear-out to the complaints of his subordinates about how helter-skelter everything had been due to the sudden disappearance of their superior, Agent Nicolas then threw himself back into the Super Water Sphere Incident investigation. He wanted to forget his mess-up by immersing himself in his work.

In order to investigate the organizations that they had been ordered to, they of course had to get access. Enticing employees who worked there to become moles who'd pass them information was one option, but that carried the risk of being fed misinformation. In the end, the surest way was to infiltrate inside directly. But with that said, the number of agents under Agent Nicolas was limited, whereas the list that they had to investigate was quite sizable. To make up for that lack of manpower, Agent Nicolas purposely leaked parts of the "list of organizations that might be backing the espers" to other countries' intelligence agencies.

As a result, the other countries' agencies also dove into action, exactly according to plan. Afterward, the CIA merely had to hack those agencies to learn what they'd learned. One trick in managing an organization is to "outsource" wherever possible. There was of course a slight possibility of another country's intelligence agency getting ahead, but America, and the CIA by extension, had enough power and influence to forcibly insert themselves into pretty much any country's investigation at will.

While making other countries' intelligence agencies dance like puppets in this

manner, Agent Nicolas dedicated himself to personally investigating the organization on the list that he thought the most suspicious. When comparing the basic information about each organization that his home country had sent over, this specific one didn't really jump out as being any more or less suspicious than all the others. However, Agent Nicolas' gut whispered to him that this one was fishy. And he had always been a man who listened to his gut. All of his achievements thus far had been attained through dull and steady investigation based on what his gut told him. Of course, then he would invariably mess up at the very last moment due to alcohol, but as he was currently maintaining sobriety, it could be said that he was in perfect condition.

That day, Agent Nicolas put on his very best suit, carefully shaved off all his stubble, trimmed all his fingernails, and then headed to an interview at Kaneyama Tech. As an all too common issue among companies that grow too abruptly, it was suffering from a severe manpower shortage, and thus was constantly hiring. Among those positions that the company was eager to fill was that of security guards. In a stroke of luck for Agent Nicolas, this position just happened to also be perfect for digging around in the company. It was a godsend. And so, with a fake resumé in hand, Agent Nicolas was there to fake it as a job seeker.

As an aside, it actually wouldn't be much of a problem if his fake resumé was seen through. After all, this was a resumé and background that had been prepared by the CIA. If this company's background check was so thorough and far-reaching that it could see through something made by the CIA, then that in itself would be grounds for suspicion.

As of late, Tokyo was gradually being overrun with eccentrics and oddballs from all over the world, which was affecting general public order in a negative way. After proceeding down a large road so as to avoid getting involved in any problems, Agent Nicolas eventually ducked into a café that caught his eye as he was feeling a little peckish.

With an older man serving as the store owner, the café actually turned out to have a pretty nice atmosphere. Agent Nicolas ordered a sandwich and a coffee, then grabbed a seat. Out of boredom, he picked up a weekly magazine among the stock of available reading material. As could be expected, there wasn't

really anything worthy of attention in a trifling gossip publication. Agent Nicolas himself could probably fill this many pages with articles that had 300 times more substance. Of course, he would promptly get fired after doing so, though.

“I’M FIIRREEEEEE MAAAANN!!!”

Caught by surprise right in the middle of taking a sip from the cup of coffee that had been brought to his table, Agent Nicolas inadvertently spat out everything in his mouth. The sudden roar triggered Agent Nicolas to reflexively stick a hand into his chest pocket due to muscle memory from his past, but then he remembered that he was not carrying a gun.

The door of the store was kicked open, then a man spewing flames from his hands barged in. For a split second, Agent Nicolas suspected him to be an esper, but the pyrokinetic known as Burning Girl was, well, a girl, and rampaging under broad daylight in a café went completely against the modus operandi of the secretive organization of espers. That could only mean that this man was just a mere lunatic.

Agent Nicolas wanted to go over and suppress the man quickly, but he was an agent in the middle of a mission. He had to avoid standing out as best he could. Although it pained him a little, he chose to stay still and watch over how the situation developed. That said, it wasn’t long before he saw an opening. Matching the timing of the store owner’s attempt to swing a chair at Fire Man, Agent Nicolas threw his saucer at Fire Man’s feet. Fire Man stepped onto the saucer and lost his balance for a split second, allowing the chair to clinch a square landing. The end result was a one-hit K.O.

Right after that, Agent Nicolas was about to quickly leave the store before the cops arrived, but then he noticed a little girl around his daughter’s age who was crying from having gotten a burn. He couldn’t help himself from tending to her, and thus ended up missing his window of escape.

Being questioned by Japanese police proved to be as equally boring and as equally a waste of time as being questioned by American police. Although it was a real pity that he ended up not making it in time for his interview at Kaneyama Tech, bumping into the bar master of his favorite bar Ama-no-Iwato was a stroke of luck. Having been gifted a premium bottle of Japanese rice wine,

Agent Nicolas headed straight home, and proceeded to “treat” all the “stress” that he had suffered from the mess that he had gotten wrapped up in. In other words, he ended up breaking his sobriety vow of two months ago (which had actually been a record for him).

As he himself had caused a negative impression by not making it to the interview, Agent Nicolas had his subordinate infiltrate Kaneyama Tech in his stead. Of course, his subordinate reacted to the order with exasperation and a few choice words, but he still complied, albeit reluctantly. The exemplary CIA agents under Agent Nicolas had gotten used to having to deal with the troubles caused by their boss’ reprehensible drinking habit.

It wasn’t long until their dull and steady investigation saw a turning point: supernatural phenomena suddenly started appearing all over the world.

The intelligence agencies of each country first approached the news with suspicion and caution. Ever since the Super Water Sphere Incident, there had been no shortage of false alarms about UMAs and UFOs and espers and magicians and everything else imaginable. Therefore at first, the reports about these supernatural phenomena got buried among all the other reports and therefore did not draw much attention.

However, by the second day, confirmation regarding their veracity starting coming in, and the intelligence agencies all flew into an uproar. A gigantic tornado above Ayers Rock. Witness accounts from the Grand Canyon about a gigantic bird. Stonehenge mysteriously grew three times in scale overnight. Ghosts wandering around Angkor Wat. Moai statues moving about on Easter Island. In many of the most famous so-called “power spots” all over the world, inexplicable incidents started happening back to back. Thus in response, every country called back the agents that they had dispatched to Japan, or at least canceled all plans they previously had in the pipeline to send more personnel. Everybody’s attention tunneled toward what was happening within their own borders.

After all, investigating in someone else’s country was bound to come with a plethora of restrictions and red tape and whatnot. If there were supernatural phenomena inside one’s own country, then concentrating time and resources toward investigating that instead should prove much more effective.

The higher-ups in CIA also thought to divert personnel toward investigating the occurrences in the States, but Agent Nicolas put a brake on those plans. The reason was because he thought there was a high possibility that this was only a decoy.

According to the profiling that the FBI used, in a serial anything, be it serial murders or serial kidnappings, it's always the first incident that is closest and most relevant to the criminal. For example, say there was a murder in Hokkaido, followed by more murders with the same modus operandi committed in Tokyo, Saitama, and then Chiba. An investigator looking at only the data would think, "3 out of the 4 incidents happened in and around the capital. Therefore, the criminal must be living in or around the capital." However, to then conduct the investigation based on that inference would be to play exactly into the criminal's plan. After all, the criminal is no idiot either. He (or she) would think and plot before committing the next murder. As with all things, with repetition comes proficiency. The criminal would learn and improve with each iteration, consequently employing more streamlined and refined methods in each successive incident.

Another way of putting this is that in most serial cases, it is the first incident where the criminal was the sloppiest and left the most clues. In the previous example of Hokkaido → Tokyo → Saitama → Chiba, then chances were high that the criminal's base of operations still is in Hokkaido, or at least was for a period of time. After impulsively committing the first murder in Hokkaido, the criminal feared being found in Hokkaido, and therefore took the trouble of going far away to throw investigators off his trail.

Agent Nicolas thought that the same inference could be made of all the supernatural phenomena taking place in relation to the espers. After all, the espers were humans too. Probably. If they were actually non-human, then it was absolutely impossible to profile them through human conventions, and there would be no other choice but to just pack up and go home. So the assumption would be that these espers were human. And if they were human, then it meant that despite possessing powers that surpassed human limits, they were still bound to human-like thought patterns, and that they would use their powers in human-like ways. In other words, upon being chased by a large

enemy, they would choose between making a stand, running away, or going into hiding. Although the way they run or hide would be through supernatural means, the main gist would still remain the same.

Following all of the above logic, placing the greatest focus on the Super Water Sphere Incident that started everything was still the best way to direct the investigation. All the other intelligence agencies were working off of the premise that “anything is possible when it comes to the supernatural, so throw away all preconceptions,” but Agent Nicolas disagreed with that approach. After all, if it was really possible to do absolutely anything, then those espers could pulverize the CIA with the blink of an eye or wipe the memory of the Super Water Sphere Incident from all humanity’s minds with a sneeze. The fact that nothing of the sort had happened could only mean that they weren’t feasible. QED, superpowers had limits too, and had their own boundaries for what could or could not be done.

Every time another report of a new supernatural phenomenon came in, Agent Nicolas further refined his profiling of the limits of these espers’ abilities. He believed that in so doing, one day all this accumulated data would help him chase down and corner them.

Roughly one week later, the supernatural phenomena occurring all over the world stopped as abruptly as they started. But just because the phenomena had stopped, it didn’t mean that the respective investigations would close up shop as well. Rather, Agent Nicolas expected that all the other intelligence agencies would remain largely occupied for at least a few more months. There were a total of 38 to 45 cases which had been confirmed beyond a certain threshold of credibility, although some were more certain than others. Among them, 7 had occurred in Japan and 8 had occurred in the UK. When considering that, together with the fact that it was also in these two countries that the two Super Water Spheres that started everything had appeared in, chances were that there was special significance to these two countries.

Of course, there was always the possibility that this, too, was also some sort of misdirection. However, if everything related to the supernatural was to be doubted, then there would be nothing left to work off of.

For the next four months after the slew of supernatural phenomena, there

were no investigative breakthroughs whatsoever. The only thing worthy of note was the discovery and capture of a spy amongst the Super Water Sphere Incident investigation team. It was their faint hope that this could perhaps lead to the breakthrough they wanted so desperately.

The captured spy was a Japanese, but it was common sense that there was no point in inferring anything about a spy based on external appearance or proclaimed nationality. Nine out of ten, this was just an intelligence agent from another country that was also chasing the espers. Even the CIA had moles inside the English MI6 and Russian SVR. This was common practice within their trade.

However, even though spies were cryptic in general, there were two things about this spy that made him even at least one notch more perplexing than all the rest. First, it proved absolutely impossible to figure out the organization that the guy belonged to. And secondly, he wasn't trying to steal information, but was feeding misinformation to the CIA team.

Regarding the first point, the guy had obviously received high-level training to be an agent, but the question of from who or where was completely blank. Upon injecting him with truth serum, the only facts learned from his confession was that he had studied under a woman whose face he didn't know, and that he possessed immense loyalty toward that woman. Before the team managed to question him any further, they discovered that he had disappeared like smoke from a completely restrained state. As he had made his escape without leaving even a single clue or trace behind, there were no more details to be gleaned from that angle.

Chances were that the organization that the spy belonged to had caught wind of his capture, and thus broken him out. However, there always remained the possibility that it was Time Lady who had used her ability to help him escape.

As for the second point, trying to feed a rival intelligence agency false information seemed, at least on first glance, to make perfectly normal sense. The race to chase down the espers was in full swing among the numerous intelligence agencies of varying nationalities who had gathered in Tokyo. From that point of view, trying to make a rival organization waste time chasing after false leads while one's own organization pulls ahead made sense.

The issue, however, was that doing so was significantly more troublesome than simply stealing information. It was much more effort than it was worth. Going to all that trouble just to feed someone else little bits of misinformation was just plain inefficient. If the aim was to gain an advantage in the information war, then this would be a terrible strategy to take.

Of course, it wasn't like intelligence agencies backed up by a country were all immune to employing bad strategies. It would be safe to say that all of them do strike out every once in a while. Case in point, despite the CIA's generally high competence, they were still keeping Agent Nicolas in their employ, in spite of his long history of mistakes. It wouldn't be unnatural to assume that other countries also kept similar personnel on the payroll in their respective intelligence agencies.

But now, what if it had been the espers who had sent someone in to mess with their investigation so as to evade their search..... would this theory be reading too much into the situation? There was no proof, but it never hurt to be safe. Thus, Agent Nicolas spent the next two months bolstering his department's anti-esper counterintelligence measures.

Based on analysis of footage of the Super Water Sphere fight in Tokyo Bay, it was known that TL's time-stopping ability had a maximum duration of no longer than 55 seconds. Although the detailed mechanism of how her power worked was still shrouded in mystery, keeping things simple by employing security that could not be broken through within 56 seconds seemed like an effective way to counter her.

In order to counter the esper who was suspected to possess clairvoyance, they had to make it so that it would be impossible to tell what was going on or what they were doing just by looking. Naturally that meant encoding everything, but the effectiveness of doing so was rather debatable. It wasn't exactly feasible to converse in code 24/7, and if the clairvoyant was watching when they passed around the new codes, then that would render the entire exercise futile. However, it was still better than nothing, so they did it as best as they could anyway.

By the time they had finished setting up all their counterintelligence measures, almost a year had passed since the Super Water Sphere Incident.

The notification from his home country that reached Agent Nicolas together with the spring wind that accompanied the turning of the season was... not good, to put it lightly. His higher-ups had started to get impatient with the investigation's lack of progress, and some in the organization were calling for Agent Nicolas' demotion and for putting someone else in charge.

With the frequency of requests for progress reports shooting up and being subjected to more and more sarcasm from his superiors, Agent Nicolas' stress levels built up higher and higher until he couldn't help but to visit his go-to bar Ama-no-Iwato and drink himself into oblivion. The only memory he retained of the night was himself endlessly and incoherently venting to the pretty lady who was another regular customer there. When he asked about it on a later day, she told him that "you were talking about your estranged wife and daughter the entire time" with a wry smile. He breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't leaked classified investigative details.

In spite of his bad drinking habit, for some reason Ama-no-Iwato was the only bar where Agent Nicolas had never messed up when drunk. It was the only oasis in his life where he could drink without a worry in the world.

After having refreshed himself, Agent Nicolas decided to personally re-investigate the organization that he had thought the most suspicious from among the list mentioned in the missive from half a year ago. Re-investigations usually were a mere waste of time, but he had no other options or leads to turn to.

The activities of the espers were always conducted in secrecy. Apparently they were fighting against black-colored monsters of indefinite form called "World Shadows" with irregular frequency. The reason why they were fighting was unknown, and there had never been eyewitness reports from someone who witnessed one such fight in action. That conspicuous confrontation with the Super Water Spheres had clearly been an exception.

The place that Agent Nicolas chose to re-investigate out of sheer desperation was none other than Kaneyama Tech Co., Ltd.

Kaneyama Tech was a metalworking company focused around the extraction and processing of rare metals. Recently, it was also making significant

expansions into the precision manufacturing market.

Previously, Agent Nicolas had tried to infiltrate the company through getting employed as a security guard, but things just didn't work out and his attempt ended in failure. He then sent a subordinate to take that job instead, but by then the position had already been filled, so the subordinate became a janitor instead.

According to that subordinate's reports, Kaneyama Tech had recently set up a top-secret research team. This was nothing out of the ordinary for large enterprises. In order to thwart industrial spies, companies would conduct R&D while keeping it secret from all its other employees. Therefore, suspecting Kaneyama Tech of having ties with espers just because of a secret research team would only invite ridicule. However, in the absence of any other clues or leads, Agent Nicolas had no choice but to make a mountain out of a molehill of suspicion to justify this excessive investigation. However, he knew probably better than anyone the odds against anything meaningful coming out of this attempt.

Agent Nicolas sighed while gloomily imagining his demotion and dishonorable return home. He had failed to live up to his daughter's expectations of a cool agent. Despite having been entrusted with a staggering amount of funding and personnel and left in charge of a case that even had the president's attention, he had not managed to produce any tangible results whatsoever.

A demotion was almost certain. And though CIA probably wouldn't go so far as to fire him, a future where he got shuttled off to an actual sinecure position didn't require too far a stretch of the imagination. The dazzling dream of successfully rounding up all the espers and returning home in a triumphant parade of acclaim and commendation that had occupied his mind when he was first appointed head of the Super Water Sphere Incident investigation had already lost all color and faded to nothingness.

He had believed in himself and done the best he could, and yet still ended up in failure. That was just how life was. That was just how reality was.

According to the notice that Agent Nicolas got from his home country, apparently his official evaluation would take place one month later. This was, in

actuality, a warning to him that he had one last month to produce results if he wanted to keep his position. In a very real way, this last investigation into Kaneyama Tech was going to be an all-or-nothing gamble for Agent Nicolas.

At first, Agent Nicolas applied himself to the investigation rather half-heartedly. However, the more he dug, the more invested he became. The reason was simple: Kaneyama Tech's security was suspiciously sophisticated.

Normally, there would be nothing out of the ordinary for such a large enterprise to have tight security. However, Kaneyama Tech had cyber protection that could withstand hacking from the CIA; employee loyalty so high that made it nigh impossible to recruit spies; intentionally complicated information handling regulations that made it extremely difficult for any one person to know the big picture; state-of-the-art infrared security cameras; and remarkably skilled security staff. All in all, the place gave off the image of a high security castle.

It was enough to fuel expectations of the place being *the* stronghold of espers that he sought, but Agent Nicolas' logical side reminded him that things rarely worked out that nicely. But that said, he was doing this out of desperation anyway, which meant giving up was not an option. With the unexpected resistance boosting his motivation a little, Agent Nicolas started to draw up plans for infiltrating the storeroom where Kaneyama Tech's top secret research team kept their top secret research material.

Due to the one month time limit, the usual strategies of establishing an inside man or negotiating or making roundabout inquiries were all out of the question. The only viable option was to go straight in and steal the research materials in person. Agent Nicolas was fully aware of the danger of getting spotted and captured. However, his motivation for taking such a high risk and resorting to such a perilous approach was not so much for the sake of the investigation as it was for his own ego. If his career was going to be over anyway, then he wanted to have at least one heroic story involving all the high stakes and flashy action as seen in the movies to bring back to his daughter as a souvenir. How pathetic would "Uh, yeah, I just did my dull and boring work everyday, then I got demoted before I managed to leave behind any achievements" sound? Leaving aside the matter of whether Sarah would let him talk to Emma anymore, that

was.

Now, there was a saying that “the outcome of a battle is decided before it even begins,” which was basically an adage on the importance of making preparations ahead of time. This was something that applied also to infiltration. In fact, it was something that was possibly even more relevant to infiltration than battles.

Regardless of how stiff the security measures in place, Agent Nicolas’ target was a corporate building. Breaking through a small part of the security for a short amount of time was not entirely impossible.

The idea of infiltrating during the night when all employees were gone and there were only security staff on site was ruled out almost immediately. The person in charge of the night shift guard duties at Kaneyama Tech, a woman named Nanami Okishima, possessed both Aikido dan belts and also a very eager work ethic. She would frequently change up the patrol times and patrol routes, which would make it a headache to both evade or overpower her. In a way, she herself was much more effective than any run-of-the-mill security measure.

With nighttime ruled out, then that could only mean doing it during daytime. So Agent Nicolas decided to take the strategy of blending in within the crowd to waltz straight in. In order to do that, he needed a disguise. As the saying “if you want to hide a tree, hide it in a forest” went, the more people there were, the harder it would be to detect his infiltration.

Asking the subordinate who was still posing as a janitor in the company for assistance was out of the question. If he got exposed, then he would get kicked out and that would be months of prep work down the drain. It was important that he remained on the inside to continue feeding the CIA information even if Agent Nicolas failed and got caught. And for Agent Nicolas, well, it didn’t matter much whether he succeeded or failed, as it would make for a pretty good story either way. Whether his NDA would allow him to tell that story was another matter altogether, though.

Through Hollywood-level make-up, Agent Nicolas transformed into the appearance of one of the Kaneyama Tech employees who was on break and just confidently strolled in from the front door. He had memorized the map of

the company's internal layout, so there was no hesitation in his step. He cheerfully greeted everyone that he passed, and nobody suspected a thing.

This was a psychological blindspot that Agent Nicolas was taking advantage of. Being on guard against suspicious individuals was one thing; being on guard against those who seemed to fit in was another altogether. If there was someone who was constantly on guard thinking "what if the person in front of me is actually a spy wearing Hollywood-level make-up?", then in all likelihood that person either had a mental illness or was an overeager Hollywood movie fanatic.

Thankfully, it seemed like there were no overeager Hollywood movie fanatics in Kaneyama Tech, as Agent Nicolas successfully managed to reach the storeroom in question without any trouble at all. From here on was going to be the real challenge.

The storeroom where the research materials were kept was under especially tight security. More specifically, the door was locked with the latest keycard entry lock. However, the CIA was also using equally state-of-the-art security. Therefore, Agent Nicolas knew exactly what tool to use to disengage this lock.

Agent Nicolas attached the disengage tool, which was about as big as a 750 ml plastic bottle, to the card reader terminal, then leaned against it so as to hide it with his own body. During the next 3 minutes that the tool needed to do its thing, he kept his phone to his ear and pretended to be occupied with a call. Normally, this series of actions would be caught on the security camera directed at the door of the storeroom and consequently trigger a flood of guards, but in a stroke of luck, it had been out of service since a few days ago.

Just when Agent Nicolas was praying to God that no one come along, a young woman appeared at the end of the corridor and started walking his way. While silently cursing God with every scrap of abusive language he knew, Agent Nicolas continued his fake phone call and tried to remain calm.

Just when Agent Nicolas was praying to the Devil that the woman would ignore him and walk on, she stopped right in front of him and stared closely into his face. Agent Nicolas ripped the Devil's wings and tail off inside his mind. Apparently he couldn't rely on God or the Devil, and his only source of salvation

was himself.

A faint sound coming from behind his back informed Agent Nicolas that the lock had been successfully disengaged. However, the woman was still standing in front of him. She had her arms crossed, and was apparently waiting for him to finish his call. With no other choice, Agent Nicolas pretended to finish up his call.

“You still haven’t recovered fully from your cold? Your voice still sounds a bit funny.”

The very first line from the woman jabbed Agent Nicolas precisely where it hurt most. Although she wasn’t Agent Nicolas’ type, she was a beauty with foxy eyes and a cool demeanor. And her normal question somehow sounded like a cross examination.

“Just taking care of some business. I’ll get back soon.”

“Yeah.....?” The woman brought her face closer and closer until their noses were almost touching. The steady eyes that seem trained on his face sent Agent Nicolas’ heart pumping. In fact, his heart was going so fast that he almost felt like puking. If his disguise was seen through at this moment, then all would have been for naught.

Or so Agent Nicolas thought when instead, the woman continued approaching until finally joining her lips with his.

It was a deep, intense kiss with plenty of tongue. Almost immediately, Agent Nicolas understood what was going on. Apparently the employee whose face he was borrowing was in a secret relationship with this woman. There had been no mention of this in the man’s background check. *May all office relationships be cursed for all eternity.*

Noticing that the woman had circled her hands around his hip in the heat of the moment, after a brief moment of hesitation, Agent Nicolas firmly pushed the woman away. When she looked at him with a hurt expression, he dealt her a follow up blow.

“How about we stop this already?”

“Even though you’re usually the one who initiates it?”

Agent Nicolas mentally smashed a wine bottle over the head of the employee whose face he was borrowing. *Don't mess up the public morals at your workplace!* It was true that Agent Nicolas had come to uncover secrets at Kaneyama Tech, but he felt like he could have gone without learning *this* dirty secret.

"I don't feel like it anymore."

".....Are you drunk? I faintly smell alcohol on your breath."

"It's just a bit, who cares? In any case, no more kissing."

"Why?"

Agent Nicolas was quickly getting tired of this exchange. The longer he wasted time here, the greater danger he was in. Therefore, he had to end it as quickly as possible. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Let's break up."

"What?"

"Our relationship is over. I'm sick and tired of your pushiness."

The woman looked completely shell-shocked. Then her face quickly turned stiff and her lips curled up.

"DIE!!" she roared while delivering a powerful slap to his cheek.

After purposely standing still and taking it, Agent Nicolas then watched her run off. Things just happened to end up with a break-up, but surely the guy wouldn't mind. Even at that very moment, he was lying in bed down with a cold while a different girlfriend was lovingly taking care of him. In fact, depending on the perspective, Agent Nicolas had just did the guy a favor by helping him resolve his adultery problem.

With the unexpected affair out of the way, Agent Nicolas refocused himself as he turned to retrieve the disengagement tool and slip into the storeroom.

The inside of the storeroom was so quiet that it hurt his ears. However, the ventilation was working hard, and the air humidity was low. On the shelves lay cardboard boxes of varying sizes, all sealed with packing tape.

To start with, Agent Nicolas reached out for the smallest box. He put on gloves, then slowly peeled back the packing tape while taking extra care to not

leave any traces. With nervousness and a slight bit of expectation running through his veins, he opened the box to find———

———Rocks.

A sigh fell involuntarily from Agent Nicolas' lips. Apparently there was no lead to the espers to be found here after all.

Kaneyama Tech was a company whose main business lay in the processing of rare metal. Chances were that these rocks were samples that contained traces of rare metal or something like that. As someone who had absolutely no knowledge regarding rocks, in Agent Nicolas' eyes they looked like mere lumps of rock.

This was the very illustration of the saying "a wild goose chase." Completely disappointed, Agent Nicolas occupied himself with sticking the packing tape back on. They were less sticky for having been peeled back once, but several other boxes also had traces of the packing tape being peeled and re-stuck, so one more shouldn't make a difference.

Agent Nicolas left the storeroom casually and went straight home after that. That was it for his investigation. End result: all investigations into the organizations suspected of supporting espers had ended up bearing no fruit. He should probably also arrange for the subordinate infiltrating as a janitor to get out of there so that he could be assigned somewhere else. Agent Nicolas himself would have already been demoted by then, though.

Agent Nicolas started making preparations for his impending resignation. Even if another post was arranged for him, it would probably be a bed of nails. He had already done his part. Having been the commander over the first batch of agents working on the unprecedented investigation of espers should be more than enough honor to console him the rest of his life. Repeating this to himself was the only way that he managed to hold onto a modicum of sanity.

As Agent Nicolas spent day after day clearing his office with a dark face, he felt like his subordinates were treating him rather coldly. Maybe some of them hated him for always keeping a stash of vodka in the company fridge. Maybe some of them were holding a grudge against him for that time he tried fire-breathing with the vodka and ended up setting documents on fire and

triggering the sprinklers.

Everyone knew the anxiety and depression that the cornered Agent Nicolas was going through, but no one offered a helping hand. Carrying on as if everything was normal would be one thing; there were those who even egged him on with something along the lines of “You’re the famous Agent Nicolas, so I’m sure you’ll reveal some important and ground-breaking clue really soon! The cases of beer bought through company expenses are all part of your big plan, right?”

Agent Nicolas replied with “Of course!” But that was mere bravado.

As Japan in general got more and more excited about the approaching Golden Week, Agent Nicolas become more and more depressed in contrast.

But then suddenly, a ray of light shined upon his wretched self in the form of his daughter Emma, his angel and the apple of his eye. A letter had come from her. Apparently, she wanted to take advantage of the coming break to come visit Toh-kyo, the “city of the supernatural.” Although it would be but a stay of only 2 days, she wanted her Papa to be her guide.

The actual Tokyo was not so much a city of the supernatural but rather a city of the eccentric, but Agent Nicolas made up his mind to put all his dignity on the line to give his daughter the best experience ever. Public order in Tokyo of late had worsened noticeably due to the abrupt influx of foreign tourists and significant numbers of illegal overstayers, which was a cause for concern. However, Emma said that she wanted to sightsee Tokyo, and so she will get to sightsee Tokyo. Papa could just protect her, then there would be no problem whatsoever.

This opportunity to show a good side of himself to his daughter during the last two days when he still held his honorable title was a complete stroke of good fortune. He wouldn’t think about what was waiting for him afterward. He had honestly already done everything he could, after all.

The day Emma was going to arrive, Agent Nicolas assigned the remainder of his duties to his subordinates and headed to Haneda Airport to pick her up. As he waited near the luggage pick-up area while holding a “Welcome Emma!” placard, soon a beaming Emma dashed over to glomp onto him in a bear hug.

Although it had only been 9 months since he saw her last, Emma in her beige-colored one piece dress with all its fluffy decorations seemed to have shot up to a hundred times in height.

“Papa!”

“There’s my Emma! Welcome to Japan! Look at you, you’ve gotten so big!!”

“I surpassed Charlotte last week!”

“That’s amazing!”

“Charlotte is the girl who sits next to her in class,” explained Agent Nicolas’ ex-wife Sarah as she caught up with their luggage in hand.

“Hey there, Sarah. Can I help you with those?”

“Sure, that would be a great help. You keeping up with your sobriety?”

“That’s the second thing you say?”

“So you aren’t..... Well, it seems like you really haven’t drank anything today, so let’s just leave it at that. At least we won’t have to remain in fear of being the target of randomly thrown knives, right?” replied Sarah sarcastically after sniffing his breath once.

By the time the luggage was stored in the trunk and everybody had piled into the car, the young lady was already rubbing her eyes sleepily from jet lag.

“Emma, should we head to the hotel first so that you can take a short nap?”

“.....No need! Papa, papa, I want to see sakura! Mama bought me the sakura-colored figure of BG, and it’s so pretty!”

“Ahh, sadly, the sakura are no longer in bloom. Their season has already passed.” Nicolas shook his head while handling the steering wheel.

Sarah interrupted, “Are you sure there aren’t any still blooming somewhere? Sakura is a spring flower, isn’t it?”

“Nope, there are none left, I’m sorry to say. Here in Japan, there’s a thing called Cherry Blossom Front where the major news agencies report on the dates when the sakura open and goes into full bloom in each part of Japan. This morning I saw the report about how the sakura are now blooming in Hokkaido,

which means all the sakura in Tokyo have already fallen by now.”

“Cherry Blossom Front? What’s that? Do the Japanese love flowers that much? Do they have a Tulip Front as well?”

“Nah, only sakura.”

“So weird.”

“.....So I can’t see sakura?”

While somehow placating the now slightly sulky Emma, Nicolas headed toward a conveyor belt sushi store. For Americans, when Japan comes up in conversation, most of the time it’s “Mount Fuji,” “geisha,” “sushi,” or “samurai.” Lately, “superpower” has been creeping onto the list. But anyway, point was that as long as he was hitting any of those themes, then he couldn’t go wrong. That simple way of thinking was orthodox because of its simplicity, and it did not let Nicolas down here. Emma became thoroughly enraptured at the sight of plates of sushi coming and going on the conveyor belt, clearly having forgotten her disappointment from not getting to see sakura. Nicolas heaved a small sigh of relief.

At the same time, Sarah also looked like she was enjoying herself quite a bit as she continued making orders one after another.

“One spicy tuna roll please!”

“Sorry, miss, we don’t serve spicy tuna roll at our store. Um, *no. No spicy tuna roll.*”

“You don’t have it? Even though this is a sushi bar?”

A warm feeling welled up in Nicolas’ heart at the sight of Sarah being indignant. She had said that he hadn’t changed in the previous 8 years, but apparently she herself had not changed that much either. People don’t really change all that much when they grow older. It was a far cry from the flurry of change and growth that the young Emma was basking in.

When Emma headed to the restroom and left the two adults alone, Nicolas washed down a piece of salmon with a sip of tea and then broached the subject that had been on his mind. “What do you think about starting over again?”

“Starting over what?” returned Sarah in an indifferent tone while grabbing a plate of salmon roe battleship sushi.

“You know what I’m talking about. Us, I mean. When I’m sitting across from you like this, I’m reminded again that I really do love you.”

“I’m not sure I can say the same. I mean, I’m thankful that you’ve kept sending us child support, but it’s not like I can’t earn enough if I really put my mind to it. I can’t exactly let a dangerous man constantly drowned in alcohol to constantly remain in close proximity to Emma.”

Nicolas wanted to refute the part about him being dangerous, but there was nothing he could say in response to the comment about being drowned in alcohol. He raised both hands in a sign of surrender.

“OK, fair enough. I’ll be honest, then. I really want to be a part of Emma’s childhood.”

“What’re you going to do with your CIA work? They won’t let you live in America, will they? And us moving to Japan is absolutely out of the question.”

“So does that mean you’ll think about it if I get a post in America?”

“Nope. I have no intention of getting back together,” declared Sarah firmly. But then she took a look at Nicolas’ face and softened her tone. “But well, if you manage to stay sober for a whole year, then maybe I’ll give it a bit of thought. You are Emma’s hero, all right? Be an actual hero and get yourself back together.”

“.....I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll keep my expectations up,” returned Sarah while sounding like she had no expectations whatsoever. Honestly, even Nicolas himself was not confident.

However, this time, the 421st try, for Emma’s sake, I will finally..... was what Nicolas was thinking when it suddenly occurred to him that Emma was taking quite a while to get back. With a tinge of worry in his voice, he asked, “Hey, isn’t Emma taking a bit too long? Can you go check in on her? Maybe she’s gotten a stomachache or something.”

“Good point. I’ll go take a look,” nodded Sarah before heading into the girls’

restroom. Not long after, she came back out, accompanied by another woman of the unpleasant sort who had a tattoo on her neck and was wearing a leopard-print shirt. While looking around the store uneasily, Sarah handed what appeared to be a letter to Nicolas. The unpleasant woman gave Nicolas an unfathomable look before stepping out.

“For some reason, Emma wasn’t in the restroom. Oh, and that woman just now told me to pass this to you.”

“What.....? Should I search the men’s restroom? Maybe she walked into the wrong one by accident.....” Nicolas lowered his eyes to the letter with only half his attention, but his face color changed rapidly as he read through it. When he was done, he leapt up with enough force to almost flip over the stack of empty plates sitting on their table and dashed out of the store. His head swiveled around quickly, but the figure of the woman was already nowhere to be seen.

Agent Nicolas spewed a torrent of expletives that would be censored out on air and crushed the letter in his hand. The letter had read as follows:

“We have your daughter. If you want her back, bring the CIA’s list and 300 million yen in cash to the green-roofed warehouse south of Ariake Station at 1900 hours. Come alone. We are keeping an eye on you. Don’t tell anyone. Your daughter’s life is over the moment you blab.”

However, when Agent Nicolas calmed back down a bit, the stupidity oozing from the lines on the letter started to give him a headache.

First, the kidnappers mentioned “the CIA’s list,” but didn’t specify exactly what list they wanted. Second, they asked for 300 million yen, which was an amount that one would have to go to a bank teller to withdraw. However, it was already past 3pm, which meant that bank teller services were closed at all banks. Even the CIA did not keep 300 million yen just lying around at headquarters. It might have been possible to arrange an after hours withdrawal from a bank by using the CIA’s influence and authority, but to do so without telling anyone? All the conditions were impossible to grant. The whole message was nonsensical.

“Why did you run out in a hurry? What did the letter say?” asked Sarah worriedly while following him out of the store. Apparently she had taken a look

at Agent Nicolas' stiffened face and caught on that something very much out of the ordinary had happened.

Agent Nicolas grabbed Sarah's shoulders, looked straight into her face, then said gravely, "I'll escort you to your hotel. Go into your room, then lock the door. Under no circumstances should you take even one step out of that room until midnight. If you don't hear back from me by midnight, then call the po—call the CIA and ask them to take you into custody. I'll write the phone number down for you later."

"That's..... wait, what about Emma? Where's Emma?"

"I can't say. But trust me."

"Trust you? I can't do that."

There was no hesitation in Sarah's rebuff whatsoever. Surely that was the result of Agent Nicolas' usual behavior, but this was no time to be squabbling.

"Have I ever betrayed you before? In any case—"

"If I could truly trust you, then I wouldn't have divorced you. I was the one who brought Emma up. I'll protect her myself."

"———OK. I get it. You win. You can be the one to protect Emma. But just know that if you come along, then I'll have to protect not only Emma but you as well. That might cause Emma to become exposed to more danger."

Sarah fell silent for a few seconds, then bit her lip so hard that blood oozed out before wordlessly running toward their car in the parking lot. Agent Nicolas chucked a few 10,000 yen bills at the sushi store employees who were looking on from a distance and gave chase. Right now, time was of the essence.

After delivering Sarah to the hotel and making sure that she was secure, Agent Nicolas made a detour to a spot where he could check out the building where the CIA headquarters was located. Just as suspected, he spotted several suspicious-looking individuals hanging about all around. It would be impossible to deploy the CIA without alerting those guys.

Agent Nicolas weaved his car in and out of narrow, unoccupied streets to throw off any possible pursuers while thinking furiously. As a principle, America

never negotiated with terrorists. Agent Nicolas was the same. The reason was that the moment terrorists think they can get anything as a result of whatever terrorist acts they were committing, then they would commit more terrorism while believing that they could get better terms from doing so. Even though Agent Nicolas was currently dealing with kidnappers and not terrorists, the same concept applied.

In the first place, when it comes to kidnapping cases, there is never any guarantee that the kidnap victim would be returned safe and sound by complying with the kidnappers' demands. To be blunt, the possibility is actually quite low. After all, why would they go to all the bother of returning a hostage? It's so much easier to use the hostage as a shield and as a trading chip for whatever they want, then just off the hostage and make a quick getaway.

In cases like these, the textbook answer is to buy enough time to gather men to launch a blitz and seize the hostage back. This time, however, Agent Nicolas had only a 3-hour window. There simply wasn't enough time to do anything. When adding the fact that Japan was an away game for the CIA, there was far too little time to make preparations in secret and launch a blitz attack.

The kidnappers' obvious stupidity was also another serious cause for concern. Hostages had value only while alive. The moment a hostage dies, all function as a shield or a weapon would be completely gone. However, not so bright kidnappers could be dumb enough to just off their hostage as a way to vent their frustration if their demands are not met. The reason why Agent Nicolas had to consider this possibility in earnest was because the wording on the letter was actually overflowing with that much stupidity. When he used a mapping app to check aerial photographs of the area south of Ariake Station, he actually found *two* warehouses with green roofs. It was almost unbelievable how sloppy these kidnappers were.

On the other hand, the fact that these guys knew that Nicolas Stallone was not a detective chasing an international fugitive but a CIA agent, as well as the perfectly pulled off kidnapping painted a very different picture.

Exactly who were the kidnappers, and how could Agent Nicolas seize his daughter back? The abnormal circumstance of his daughter having been kidnapped caused his little grey cells, which were normally just pickled in

alcohol, to run at fiber optic speed.

Firstly, he could immediately dismiss the possibility of espers being involved. This was just far too different from their usual movement patterns.

The mixture of brilliance and sloppiness that could be seen in what was happening most likely could be chalked up to there being two different organizations. In other words, there was the kidnapping organization, and another organization in a supportive or hired position.

There was no end to the list of CIA's contenders. Any entity with a certain degree of information gathering ability could figure Agent Nicolas out as the head of the CIA's local investigative team dedicated to the Super Water Sphere Incident. Leaking that piece of information to a third party and instigating them to put this kidnapping into action all as a way to rattle Agent Nicolas up..... actually sounded quite possible.

Was it MI6 or SVR behind the kidnappers? However, even when taking into consideration that everything happening here was being performed through a third party, everything was still far too sloppy. Chances seemed higher that this was one of the smaller countries' agents thoughtlessly slapping a plan together as an impetuous attempt at getting the CIA's information.

In any case, it made sense to think of the actual culprits and the information provider as two different entities. Agent Nicolas decided to focus solely on the former for now. For starters, he remembered the tattoo on the neck of the woman who had delivered the letter. From his 8 years living in Tokyo chasing down every single rumor that could even remotely be related to espers, Agent Nicolas had naturally come into frequent contact with the city's underground. There were several tattoo artists that he was acquainted with.

After confirming that he was not being tailed—thus confirming that the “We’re keeping an eye on you” was a mere bluff—Agent Nicolas headed to the nearest tattoo artist that he knew. He showed the guy a drawing of the tattoo that he had drawn down from memory. And in a stroke of luck, the first artist he hit turned out to be the jackpot. With only a few love taps and a bit of roughing up, the young tattoo artist blabbed everything that he knew.

According to him, the woman who delivered the letter had that tattoo done

about a year ago, and she was apparently the wife of one of the brass of the yakuza group Tadokoro-gumi.

Tadokoro-gumi was a very sizable yakuza syndicate based in Tokyo who had, up till recently, carved up the city in half together with its rival, Tanioka-gumi. However, it had failed to seize the business opportunities born from the Super Water Sphere Incident, and was now a mere shadow of its former self.

Upon learning all this, Agent Nicolas then called up the Japanese police officer that he was acquainted with, a guy named Yasui, and asked him about Tadokoro's most recent movements. Detective Yasui was one of those so-called corrupt policemen, which meant that he was a convenient man who couldn't be trusted but would happily sell information as long as the money was good. Apparently he also held connections to the yakuza. He was absolutely perfect as an information source in this situation.

According to Detective Yasui, Tadokoro-gumi was losing badly and bleeding members left and right. And about two days ago, the roughly 10 people who included the boss and the brass had been secretly going around making preparations for something.

Bingo.

If it was only around 10 people, then Agent Nicolas could handle them on his own. After all, it wasn't like he would have to take on all 10 at the same time. Surely there would be a few isolated outside as lookouts, and quite possibly there would be non-combatants included in that count as well. It was hard to imagine all 10 being skilled martial artists or sharpshooters and all of them coming after him at once.

If he could have things his way, then he would have liked to call in support from his office as well. However, the kidnappers were keeping an eye on the building and thus would catch on as soon as CIA agents rushed out en masse. And to be honest, at the moment, the authority and respect that Agent Nicolas commanded over the agents were, well, pretty much nil. It could also be said that his popularity had fallen to rock bottom. It was highly doubtful whether they would be willing to put themselves in harms' way for something unrelated to their duties for the sake of a superior on the cusp of a demotion. In the first

place, there wasn't enough time left to gather, brief, and deploy a whole group of people.

By the time Agent Nicolas managed to identify exactly who he was up against, there was only about an hour left until the rendezvous. He was overwhelmingly out of time. As he had already worked out a clear picture of his enemy and what he had to do, then all that was left was to make preparations to actually pull it off. He first ducked into a store specializing in travel goods to buy a dial lock-type trunk case. Then he nabbed a whole bunch of newspapers from a paper recycling truck and attacked them with scissors in a spout of impromptu handicraft.

Slightly short of 4 hours since the kidnapping took place, Agent Nicolas was racing his car toward the specified exchange location. Within that amount of time, he had actually pulled off the theoretically possible but extremely difficult feat of determining the identity of the kidnappers. And he had even prepared a battle plan for the exchange.

During nighttime, the warehouses facing Tokyo Bay were enveloped in a very unique atmosphere due to a combination of the sound of lapping waves and the far-off cacophony of the streets. There were two green-roofed warehouses, but one of them had a suspicious-looking black luxury car sitting out front, so Agent Nicolas could immediately tell which one he was supposed to approach. Just in case that wasn't enough, a dangerous-looking man with blond-dyed hair sitting with his legs resting on the steering wheel pressed his car horn loudly.

Agent Nicolas retrieved the trunk case and got out of his car. As he was doing so, the skinhead man who had been leaning against the black luxury car puffing on a cigarette slightly pulled down his sunglasses to glare at Agent Nicolas.

"You Nicolas?"

"Yes."

"The money and the list?"

"Got them right here."

As Agent Nicolas raised the trunk case in his hand, the man smiled sickeningly and demanded in an overbearing tone, "Hand it over."

“In exchange for my daughter. I’m not handing it over until I see my daughter safe and untouched.”

“You think you’re in a position to set conditions? Enough of your shit, hand the case over already. Or we could just kill you and pry it from your cold, dead fingers.”

“That’s not going to fly. Look closely. The trunk case is tied to my wrist with handcuffs. It’s going to be quite the pain trying to get it off. And furthermore, there’s a dial lock on this case. I’m the only person who knows the code. If you kill me—”

“Stop blabbering on and on already! Hand it over now or I’ll kill you!” The man approached Agent Nicolas while loudly threatening him, his face red and spraying spittle all over. He even took out a knife and started brandishing it ostentatiously.

The conversation was going nowhere. Agent Nicolas was glad that Skinhead was an idiot, but it was going to be a problem if he was *too* stupid. At this rate, he was in danger of being stabbed by a yakuza with weeds growing inside his head. Nobody would stand to gain anything at all from such a resolution.

As Agent Nicolas tried his best to suppress the urge to smack Skinhead’s face with the case in his hand, he noticed another man with tattoos on his arms approaching from behind Skinhead. Tattoo Man pulled Skinhead off of Nicolas with an exasperated expression, asking, “What are you doing? Let him in already.”

“B-But this guy, he’s fucking pissing me off. Let me sock him—”

“I said, let him in. Do I have to repeat myself a third time?”

Skinhead finally backed off, but not before loudly clicking his tongue once. Then the three of them headed into the warehouse.

The interior of the warehouse turned out to be roughly the size of 4 convenience stores put together. The floor was covered with a rather aged yet still fluffy carpet, and there were sofas placed around the room. The place was illuminated with well-worn incandescent light bulbs dangling from the ceiling.

Skinhead and Tattoo Man returned to their guard duties outside, leaving only

seven people in the warehouse, not counting Agent Nicolas. Sitting in a chair right next to the only door was the woman he saw earlier at the sushi restaurant. Standing next to her was a man wearing a nice-looking suit. The middle-aged man sitting on the biggest sofa with his arms crossed who was glaring at Agent Nicolas with the razor-sharp eyes of a carnivore was most likely the boss of Tadokoro-gumi. The two men with bulging muscles standing behind him were probably his bodyguards. One of them was holding a katana, while the other—for some reason—had a silver-colored spear.

Then at the very far end of the warehouse, gagged and bound to a chair, was none other than Emma herself. The last guy was standing at her back fiddling with a knife.

“Emma! Don’t worry, Papa’s come to save you!”

Due to the gag in her mouth, Emma was only capable of responding with muffled grunts. However, her tear-streaked face practically beamed with happiness. Overwhelming relief washed over Agent Nicolas, but he braced himself. He had confirmed that his daughter was still safe and sound, which meant the only thing left to do was to pound these shitty kidnappers into the ground and save her.

“Show us the money and the list,” said the boss in a grave tone.

“Let my daughter go first.”

“Show us. The money. And the list.”

Agent Nicolas tried to negotiate without actually expecting it to work. Sure enough, the boss merely repeated his words in an even lower tone, leaving Agent Nicolas no choice but to reluctantly open up the trunk case. But after keeping it open for 2 to 3 seconds—enough time to show the stacks and stacks of bills packed inside—he closed it right back up before one of the approaching guards got close enough to take a better look.

The inside of the case was actually only filled with stacks of newspaper clippings topped by a single ten thousand yen bill each. This was something that would be seen through immediately upon inspection. To move matters along, Agent Nicolas impudently said to the displeased-looking boss, “As I told your lackey outside, I’m the only person who knows the code to unlock this case. The

case itself is made of titanium alloy, so you wouldn't be able to force it open even if you throw a high-explosive bomb at it. This is my hostage."

Of course, that was a lie. The truth was that the case was made up of common aluminium. However, his identity as a CIA agent, when coupled with his confident attitude, lent a lot of credence to his claim.

Among the slightly flustered yakuza members, only the boss looked completely unfazed. After taking a long look at Agent Nicolas, he then simply said, "Cut off one of his daughter's pinkies."

"Gotcha, boss."

".....No, don't! Hold on!" blurted out Agent Nicolas as he saw the man behind Emma re-adjust his grip on his knife.

The boss smiled viciously. "Tell us your code, then."

Agent Nicolas made a face filled with bitterness and distress. *All right, here goes.*

"Ok, ok. Then let's do it like this. I'll write down the code. All of you fall back against the wall. Then I'll fold the piece of paper—" While continuing his explanation, Agent Nicolas tore off a page from one of the magazines lying on top of a table, then reached for the ballpoint pen tucked into his chest pocket. "—and stick it to the opposite wall from where you guys are. That's how we'll exchange Emma and the code. You got it? So now I'll use this ballpoint pen—"

Agent Nicolas brandished his pen, drawing the eyes of everyone in the room.

"—and I'll do this!"

When Agent Nicolas pressed a button on the ballpoint pen, pure red Tabasco sauce shot out with the velocity of a water gun, landing bullseye on the eyes of the yakuza positioned behind Emma. It was a complete surprise attack.

"What is—my eyes—MY EYEESSS!! AHHHHHHH!!"

Knife Man's scream caused everyone's attention to stray, after which was just Agent Nicolas' one-man show. He lashed out with the case, clinched flying kicks, threw scissors, then threw more punches with the case. The lookouts who rushed in due to the commotion were also summarily rendered unconscious.

The boss kept backing off while firing a pistol non-stop, but not a single shot came even close to grazing Agent Nicolas. The latter calmly counted the number of shots, then moved in to finish the job with a case to the face.

The possession of firearms was extremely strict in Japan, which meant that even yakuza bosses had extremely limited opportunity to practice shooting with live rounds. There was data that showed that when an untrained person fires wildly from a distance of 3 meters away, chances were high that not even a single shot would land. In such a situation, the proper way to use the pistol would be to close the distance first before shooting. In other words, the moment the boss started backing off, he had already thrown away any chance he had at hitting his target.

After knocking everyone out and tying them up tightly, Agent Nicolas undid the bindings on his daughter and gave her a fierce bear hug.

“Papa! I believed you would come for me! I belie—*u, uuu, waaaahhhhhhhh.....!*”

“Everything’s all right now. Everything’s all right. I’m sorry for letting you go through such a scary experience. Everything’s all right now.”

Eventually, Emma cried herself to sleep. Agent Nicolas called the fretting Sarah to tell her they were both safe, then called the police.

Kidnapping. Coercion. Discharge of a firearm. Tadokoro-gumi was disbanded as of that day.

Just as Agent Nicolas was about to leave the warehouse with Emma on his back, a thought gave him pause. Yakuza using guns and katanas was understandable. But then what was with that spear?

Out of sheer curiosity, he went over and poked the spear lying on the ground with his toe. After rolling it over a few times, he bent down to investigate it further. The silver-colored spear looked brand new. However, a closer look revealed that it wasn’t so much a spear as it was a spear-shaped machine of some sort, as evidenced by several cryptic-looking bumps and buttons that lined its length.

And right in the middle of the grip was the crest of a sun.

Agent Nicolas was so familiar with that crest that he had even seen it in his dreams before. It was the exact same design that had decorated the masks worn by BG and FK.

The espers' sun crest was frequently used among the occult manias in the city, to the point where it was almost a sign of all goods of that nature. However, would the yakuza actually buy into the fad so much as to make a toy spear decorated with this crest and swing it around?

After a slight moment of hesitation, Agent Nicolas decided to take the spear back with him. After all that he had gone through to find a lead on the espers, and yet to still come up empty-handed, he knew how low the chances were of something that he randomly picked up from a bunch of yakuza turning out to be anything significant. But well, just in case, right?

Agent Nicolas chucked the spear into the trunk of his car, then gently settled the still sleeping Emma in the shotgun seat. Police cars passed right by just as he drove away from the crime scene. Surely their questioning and reporting to his superiors at the CIA could wait till tomorrow. For now, he wanted to get back to the hotel as soon as possible to put Sarah's mind to rest, and then he wanted to drift off into sleep while gazing upon Emma's sleeping face.

It had been a long, long day indeed.



Three months after the kidnapping incident, Nicolas Stallone was no longer a CIA agent anymore. He had returned to America, and was giving it his best trying to get back together with his wife. Every day that he got to spend together with his family made him ever more grateful for having regained what he had lost all those years ago.

However, the man Nicolas Stallone had not been fired. In fact, it was with the greatest of regrets that his previous workplace finally allowed him to go.

The silver spear that he had picked up at the end turned out to be an enormous windfall. Detailed analysis revealed that it was packed full of technology and mechanisms beyond what was possible with humanity's current level of technological prowess. Nicolas, who had been on the cusp of being demoted, found himself in the center of a storm of acclamation and praise.

Unfortunately, the spear was missing whatever fuel it ran on and thus could not be activated, but there was no doubt that this was an extremely important piece of evidence related to the espers or to some other supernatural existence. The yakuza who was wielding it only had “I bought it at a street stall” to say, and the seller was never determined.

Despite all efforts to make Agent Nicolas stay, including terms so good that they had never been and never again will be heard in CIA history, he still firmly chose to stay with his family instead. And good thing he did, too, for the silver spear suddenly vanished three days after its importance was recognized.

The details of the before and the after of the seemingly impossible disappearance from under heavy security reminded Nicolas of the spy who had burrowed into CIA headquarters and similarly made his escape after being captured. However, there was no way to prove the relatedness of the two incidents.

Predictably, CIA headquarters erupted into absolute pandemonium. What Nicolas later heard about how the staff had been wailing and running around in complete bewilderment made him feel thankful that he hadn't been there when it happened.

As Nicolas settled into the rocking chair in his living room and enjoyed the cup of coffee that his wife had brewed while reading the morning paper, the sound of a letter falling into their door's letterbox rang out. Immediately, Emma got up from playing around with dismantling a clock and cheerfully dashed over to retrieve it.

Nicolas smiled gently, finding even the most trivial facets of ordinary life precious and dear.

Emma soon came back with the letter in hand. She clambered onto Nicolas' lap, then read aloud the sender's name.

“It says that this letter is from Sri Jayawardanacafe Latte! What a weird name, don't you think, Papa?”

Afterword

This was something that happened back when I was still young and pure of heart, when I innocently still believed in the existence of magic and superpowers and was sure that I could eventually punch craters into the school yard if I only did enough training. Tough training was a huge pain in the butt, but I still wanted to try making a super powerful attack, so I decided to try storing up power in my right hand.

Normally, people swing their hands when walking. They also use their hands to hold stuff and move stuff. So then, if I didn't use my right hand for an entire month, then all the power that would normally get used up in everyday life would get saved up, which would enable me to release all that energy in one go as an incredible attack!

This was an entirely logical concept, a perfect theory that left no room for any counterargument. Suddenly afraid of myself and my revolutionary idea, I decided to keep this terrifying power-up hack to myself to prevent sowing chaos in the world. I proceeded to seal my right hand while prudently keeping my idea to myself.

Why did I only seal my right hand? How am I supposed to live life with both hands sealed, huh?!

Surprisingly, living without using one hand wasn't as conspicuous as expected. To my surprise, I managed to get through a whole month without anyone noticing. By then, I had already discovered my talent for coming up with perfectly reasonable-sounding excuses, so I had every confidence that even if someone had asked about my hand I would have been able to gloss it over without arousing their suspicion.

I was completely giddy with excitement. Although I didn't feel power accumulated within my right hand, according to theory there should actually be an enormous store just waiting to be unleashed. Exactly what would happen if I was to release it.....!

My original idea had been to destroy the school courtyard, but if I did that then everybody would be out of a place to have PE class. Having come to this realization, I, being the considerate person that I was, went instead to a remote place where no one was around. Then I mustered every scrap of strength in my arm and threw a punch toward the clear, blue sky.

And! Would you believe it!

Nothing happened!

(Like srsly) Y u no work??

However, no matter how much I wailed, reality would not change. Through this experience, I learned the joy of yearning for a superpower, the excitement from putting in effort, the thrill of keeping a secret, and the despair from realizing that I didn't actually possess a superpower.

This series was packed with everything I gained from that incident. The only difference from real life was that superpowers really do exist within these pages. One really does develop superpowers through training, the brainstorming of unique training methods is a ton of fun, effort is rewarded in the eventual attainment of a transcendental power, and everything I've said so far has been a lie.

Yep.

So yeah, basically, this book is, well, this kinda story. It would make me happier than anything if you would enjoy reading this modest pack of lies.

—A certain day in July 2019, Hagane Kurodome

Bonus Short Stories

My Younger Brother is Making a Harem

My younger brother is making a harem. I'm not sure I can hold myself back any longer.

Last year around autumn, he suddenly awakened to the "truth of fire" or some random nonsense like that, then went and dyed his hair red and started walking around with a lighter. That was fine. He was in his second year of middle school after all, so I just thought, "Ahh, so he's caught that disease. Can't wait to enjoy making him writhe in mortification about this phase of his several years down the line" and smirked knowingly. Things were still great at that time.

But around winter, he started bringing a really cute girl home every once in a while. She was his classmate, and her name was Touka Hasumi. With a small build, a well-kept appearance, and a calm personality, she was a total 10. When I tried talking to her a little, I learned that she and Shouta had gotten close ever since she transferred in, when Shouta had been nice to her and helped her with various things. What is that? You getting chummy with a transfer student, Shouta? You bastard, why is it always you who gets to enjoy all the delicious developments, huh?

Shouta kept insisting that he was not going out with her, but I had my doubts. Two to three house visits per month were quite frequent for a guy and girl who weren't going out, and every time they would lock themselves up in his room, obviously not wanting us to find out whatever it was that they were doing. What are two teenagers in the middle of puberty doing secretly in a locked room? It's gotta be something lewd, right? Or so I thought while pressing my ear against the door one day and, instead of hearing moans, I instead heard the Heart Sutra being recited. Seriously, what are they doing in there.....?

However, just when I was starting to come to terms with their weird, puzzling

relationship and give them my mental support, this time he brought a lost little girl back home. This girl, too, was off-the-charts cute, with silver hair and blue eyes. What's more, she was a vegetarian and had elf-like ears. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she came from another country, as she could only speak some weird foreign language that wasn't Japanese or English. The thing was, her cuteness was almost otherworldly, to the point where she could easily become a top tier actress or a supermodel ten years down the line. And for some reason, she seemed really excited about being lost and not having a home to live in.

Our parents had always wanted a daughter, so when Shouta asked them to allow her to stay with us, they agreed without missing a beat. I wasn't entirely opposed to it either. My only worry was that, in light of the fact that Shouta had high school exams and I had college exams coming up, she would be noisy, but the little girl—Baba-Nyan-chan—was apparently blessed with genius-level intellect. Whenever I asked her to be quiet, she would obediently stop whatever she was doing that was making a racket, so there was no problem at all.

What was a problem, however, was that Baba-Nyan-chan grew super attached to Shouta. It was to the level where I wouldn't have been surprised to hear her say something along the lines of "I'll be Shouta's wife when I grow up!" out of the blue one day.

W.H.Y?!

Shouta is an idiot who would say something stupid like "worship the Fire" or "believe in the Flame" whenever anything happens, all right? He's the idiot who turned on our kitchen stove and kept staring into the fire until our mother found him and he got completely chewed out! Being nice to girls is beyond his ability! Is it because he's a delinquent? Are delinquents really that appealing? Is it really true that girls find slightly "dangerous" guys attractive?

Why does Shouta get to have girls fawning over him when I'm still..... dammit, I hope you fail your entrance exam! More specifically, fail your first choice and get into your back up choice so that you'll regret it the rest of your entire life!

.....However, for some reason, Shouta was pretty good at studying. After he dyed his hair and turned delinquent, his grades had been steadily going up. Don't grades normally go down when someone goes delinquent?

My question was finally answered the day we were celebrating his successful acceptance into the high school of his choice. A jaw-droppingly beautiful lady with huge knockers wearing an extravagant dress the likes of which I'd never seen before drove up in an expensive black luxury car to drop off a celebratory cake for him. The explanation that Shouta gave was that she was an acquaintance that he had made at the café that he frequently stopped by after school called Ama-no-Iwato.

Is this what I think it is? So he's been getting personal tutoring about this and that and everything from this big-boobed pretty lady on a frequent basis?

.....SHOUTA! YOU BASTARD!

I grabbed Shouta's collar. "I won't forgive you! Why are cute lolis and pretty girls and beautiful ladies gathering around just you!? Introduce some to me too!!"

"Hmph, no can do. You aren't a Chosen One after all," replied Shouta smugly.

Of all the freaking..... This goddamn chuuni bastard.....!

Ba~ka, ba~ka!

Harem bastards should just kill themselves!

I Am Ippai Attena

There was a cat was a stray born from two strays. His large build was covered with long, black fur, but his most distinctive characteristic were his glowing gold eyes. He was always out in the wild, prowling about the streets scrounging for food scraps. The humans called him by a large variety of names that included Nyanko, Nyan-Nyan, Neko-chan, Neko, Kuro, Noir, Yashamaru, and Dark Rebellion.

He let the humans call him whatever they wanted, for he had a magnanimous heart. When humans wanted to pet him, he let them do as they pleased, and he

also did as he pleased. That was what freedom was. No one could tie him down. The only way he could be tied down was if he himself wished to be tied down. Those who got in his way got to taste the power of his Sure-Kill Cat Punch. His heavy class Cat Punch had left no small number of cats drowning in a sea of milk up to now.

On a certain day in winter, when the weather was colder than usual, he silently made his way down into a small side alley as if to escape the fierce eddies of wind blowing around in between the high rises. A hop, a jump, and he had arrived at the first floor veranda of a housing complex where a girl was carving a piece of rock over some newspapers.

The girl—Touka Hasumi—quickly noticed his entrance, and smiled softly. “Come here, Nyanko.”

“Nyaan.....!” The cat’s dignified cry in response was cut short when, right as he was about to climb into Hasumi’s lap, he noticed the calico. No, it wasn’t only the calico. There was also a white one, a spotted one, an orange tabby, a brown tabby, and several others curled up over and around Hasumi in various positions.

“Nyaa.....! Nyooo.....!” The realization that he had arrived too late prompted a cry of disappointment.

Hasumi was a well-known human among the cat world of Adachi City. She was very often buried with cats during the winter. After all, she was warm. Even on bone-piercingly cold days, she would remain outside for long periods of time, quietly carving away. The entire time, warm air would be emanating from her entire body, providing very welcome shelter for all the cats struggling against the elements. Every once in a while, she would even put out warm milk.

The cats, with their unique eyesight, could see that Hasumi was constantly clad in what looked like a thin layer of flames. That made her a special existence. Still inferior to cats, of course, but superior to all other humans at least.

In addition to the above, this cat was in the know. He knew that Hasumi was fighting black monsters in empty alleyways and abandoned buildings night after night. In fact, he had seen her doing so himself. Hasumi had a terrifying ability

to control fire, fire so powerful that it could reduce wood to ashes and cause stone to turn red-hot in an instant. He understood that if she ever felt like it, she could produce fragrant-smelling roasted cat en masse at any time.

But he didn't care about that. He squeezed himself in between the other cats and allowed himself to fully indulge in the soft, pleasant warmth emanating from Hasumi. This enjoyment was definitely something that he could allow himself to be tied down for. Ahh, I can't, oh it's so warm, no, no, no, it's going to make me go soft, oohh it's so good, no I can't, no I can't, this cannot go on, this terrible human is going to make us unable to live without her.....

The cats were savoring this time of sheer bliss with only the sound of carving filling the air, feeling themselves melting into puddles when suddenly, a very unwelcome intruder crashed into their paradise.

"Hey Touka, you remember what pages we have to do for our math homework today?"

The glass door to the veranda rolled opened, revealing Shitty Ice-Cold Human with a notebook in one hand. It was already more than cold enough, and yet this hateful young man was throwing around even more cold air. He was well-known among the cat world, but in a bad way, as the third wheel who would sometimes show up together with Hasumi as a set.

In an effort to protect their paradise, the cat quickly leaped up with fangs bared. A split second later, the other cats that were dozing off also woke up and, quickly understanding the situation, similarly bared their fangs and raised their tails up into the air, hissing loudly in intimidation.

The young man merely laughed scornfully, "What, you wanna go at it? I'll tell you, you'd best get outta here with your buddies before any of you get hurt, Dark Rebellion. Shoo, shoo!"

"Fugyah—!" The contemptuous young man received a Sure-Kill Cat Punch as payback. That was the bell that signaled the start of a great war that would go down as a famous tale within the cat world for many, many moons to come

————

In the Spur of a Drunken Moment

On a certain night, when I felt like making pork miso soup but realized that I was out of taro, I stepped out of Ama-no-Iwato and headed toward a nearby convenience store. Along the way, I ended up bumping into Akkun, one of my classmates from middle school.

“Akkun? You Akkun?”

“Wha—hey, if it isn’t Kinemii!”

“You haven’t changed at all, Akkun. You doing good?”

“Good, good. How many years has it been? Last time we saw each other was our coming-of-age ceremony, wasn’t it?”

Just like how I remembered him, Akkun was wearing black-rimmed glasses and was tall like a sprout. He looked to be at least 190 cm.

The course of our conversation eventually prompted us to head to an izakaya pub together. With alcohol in our stomachs, he shared with me that the company he entered after graduating from college had gone bankrupt, and that he was now a haken shain, part of a staffing agency who would dispatch him to work with other companies on a contract basis.

“What about you, Kinemii?”

“Me? I’m a bar master.”

“For reals? Tell me where your place is, I’ll come visit some time. You raking it in?”

“Not really, no. But the owner of the place, she’s absolutely loaded, so I’m getting a stable salary from her.”

“How much monthly?”

I put up a few fingers in reply, which caused Akkun to sigh enviously. Since I’m pretty much Kaburagi-san’s kept man. Honestly, if she ever abandons Ama-no-Iwato, it’ll go out of business in a month.

After that, our conversation flowed, as did our glasses. In a drunken stupor, we exited the izakaya and impulsively grabbed a taxi toward a mountain.

“Mountain! Bring us to a mountain!”

“We’ll climb it! We’ll climb the heck out of it!”

However, apparently the taxi driver was quite used to handling noisy drunken customers, as he just calmly delivered us to the foot of a random nearby mountain.

With how late in the night it was, and with the tree canopy obstructing most of the moonlight, the mountain trail was almost pitch black. However, we somehow made do with the light from our smartphones. It wasn’t actually that tall a mountain, so eventually we reached the peak even with our drunken tottering.

There was a little viewing platform at the peak, as well as several benches with the paint peeling off, and a vending machine with almost half of the selection lit with a “Sold Out” mark standing next to some public toilets.

We climbed onto the viewing platform, while guffawing loudly, in an attempt to catch a view of Tokyo’s nightscape, but there were so many overgrown trees in the way that we couldn’t really see anything. Hard to expect more from a mountain that isn’t a tourist spot, really. We didn’t even know the name of the mountain that we were on.

“Kinemii, I’ll tell you my secret. Wanna hear it?” asked Akkun meaningfully while driving away the ants that were gathering toward the light from his smartphone.

“Sure man~”

“Then I’ll tell you. Actually, I am Invisible Titan. You surprised?”

“Wait, seriously?!” So Akkun is a telekinetic too?! I didn’t notice at all! So Akkun is the Boss of the secret organization Amaterasu! It was also him who went on a rampage during the Super Water Sphere Incident.....?

“You see that bench? I’ll lift it with my telekinesis and make it explode. Haaaahhh.....!” shouted Akkun with a serious face while thrusting his hands toward the vending machine. However, almost immediately he laughed, “Nah, just messing with—”

The bench floated up, then exploded into pieces.

“—you.....?”

“Dude, you’re for reals!”

Akkun stared in mute amazement.

Isn’t Akkun just amazing? He can use telekinesis, apparently! Me? I didn’t do it! No wait, maybe I did? I might have!

Akkun exchanged looks between his hands and the remains of the bench, then rubbed his eyes. “Kinemii, I think I’ve had too much to drink. I’m gonna take a nap now.”

“Yeah? Sure, then me too.”

The two of us occupied several seats on the viewing platform and promptly dozed off.

Luckily, I woke up earlier than Akkun the next morning. When memories of what happened last night flowed into my head, the blood drained from my face. I immediately used telekinesis to swiftly gather up the remnants of the bench and bury them where they wouldn’t be found. Just as I finished getting rid of the evidence, Akkun stirred and opened his eyes, which were still bleary with sleep.

“Kinemii, do you remember? Last night I think I, like, lifted a bench and destroyed it.....”

“What’s that about a bench? Which bench?”

Prompted by my question, Akkun turned to look down from the viewing platform. There was nothing down there. “Nah, never mind. I must have dreamed it.”

PHEW! It was a relief that what I had destroyed was a mere park bench. It was a relief that I hadn't destroyed the planet in the spur of a drunken moment.

Let’s keep the drinking in moderation in the future.

The Intimate Relationship Between a Large Company and a

Secret Organization

There's quite a lot involved when entering a large company through connections.

When I heard that the company that my uncle founded was raking it in, I wasted no time discarding my position as an engineer in my old exploitative company to enter his Kaneyama Tech. And I still do not think that was a mistake.

My salary became 3 times what it was previously, and I had 50 days of annual leave. This was probably the best working conditions out of all companies in Japan. But that said, apparently even such a company had a dark side.....

"Hey man, you got a spare air conditioner lying around? I need one."

"I shall arrange for one immediately."

Having to lower my head toward the delinquent middle schooler who suddenly barged into the company's R&D lab was a bit hard to do. The guy's name was Shouta Takahashi, and he was an esper.

When I entered the company, I was assigned to their top-secret department and made to sign an NDA. Then they revealed to me the shocking truth that Kaneyama Tech's abrupt and sudden growth was due to its cooperation with Amaterasu, a secret organization of espers. I was handed profiles of each of the members—color pictures included—and ordered to memorize it all.

Wait, seriously? The espers that the whole world is scrambling about looking for are here, and you're going to tell me their true identities just like that?

The espers turned out to be much more normal than I expected. But that said, all of them were still quite abnormal in their own way. Takahashi was a red-haired delinquent, Hasumi was a devout Buddhist, Kaburagi-san was an actual duchess, and Ig was, well, a monkey.

Maybe being weird was one of the requirements for gaining a superpower.

"Oh right! Can you also make it able to spit out fire?"

"I-I shall do my best." What is with that request? Like hell an A/C spits out fire. What's inside your head, a gas stove?

However, the president-issued rule in our company was to always do our best to grant the wishes of whatever the espers asked for. Life is hard.

Just as I was about to affix a gas stove to the outside of the cooler—no better idea came to mind—the goddess of my salvation, Kaburagi-san, suddenly popped in. As soon as she learned what was going on, she got a little bit cross and gave Takahashi a bit of a scolding, telling him not to make unreasonable demands of us. With that, the order for a fire-spitting A/C was canceled.

I want to get a scolding from Kaburagi-san too.....

On another day, I had to act as a chauffeur for a middle school girl. Among the elites that composed the top-secret team, I was the only one who got in through connections. With the experience that I had at my previous company, I wasn't a complete novice, but the tasks assigned to me were still more often than not the more miscellaneous stuff. When I was out taking a faulty computer for repairs, a middle school girl knocked on my window just as I was waiting for the red light at an intersection.

The girl's name was Touka Hasumi, and she was an esper. Behind her stood another girl of a similar age. According to their account, apparently they were in a hurry to get to Minato City. Of course, I let them in readily. Fulfilling the requests of the espers came before any of the company's miscellaneous tasks.

When I shot a quick look into the back mirror, I saw Hasumi seemingly putting on a light layer of makeup. She was wearing a chaste-looking white one-piece dress, and a small handbag sat on her knees. The other girl was the same. Going to watch a live performance together with a friend? What a middle school girl thing to do.

"Where specifically in Minato City?"

"Fukushi Hall in Shimbashi please. There should be a 'Sermon by Head Monk Tetsumon' placard prominently displayed out front, so it shouldn't be hard to spot."

So NOT a middle school girl thing to do! On second thought, it seems like the girl next to her doesn't actually look all that enthusiastic about this. I guess listening to a friend's whims isn't easy no matter your gender or age, huh.

“Um, sorry mister, for making you go so far out of your way when you’re so busy. Unfortunately, we weren’t having any luck catching a taxi.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. It’s totally fine,” I answered candidly as Hasumi bobbed her head apologetically. How could I feel troubled getting to drive cute girls around? Everything was perfect, except for the faint scent of incense that maybe they were wearing in lieu of perfume. I tried as hard as I could, but I just couldn’t detach that smell from the memory of my grandmother’s house.

The girl next to Hasumi whispered to her, “Touka-chan, what’s your relationship with this man?”

“Mmm..... you could call it a cooperative partnership, I guess.”

With her curiosity piqued, the girl tried engaging me in conversation several times. However, I was under NDA, and thus couldn’t talk about superpowers or espers with unrelated people. Therefore, I merely stayed silent, which actually only fanned the girl’s curiosity even further.

There really is quite a lot involved when working for a company that’s closely partnered up with a secret organization.

A Stalker’s Bizarre Experience

Kazuto Oidani was a stalker.

He was a jobless 35-year-old who lived in Adachi City within Tokyo. The day he lost his job, he had found his fated person, who he then started stalking with every spare waking moment.

The person that Oidani stalked was a lady named Shiori Kaburagi. She was an incredibly rich and successful person, held an actual peerage, lived in a mansion with attendants, was a Tokyo University graduate, and possessed such perfect, otherworldly beauty that pictures secretly taken of her were all over social media.

Shiori was a very shy person; many a time she had successfully shaken off his tailing. Additionally, whereas she had used to hang dry her underwear outdoors, she switched to doing it inside the day after he started stalking her. But Oidani understood and did not fault her for this shy and modest expression

of bashfulness.

A week after he began his stalking, Oidani was once again following behind Shiori as she made her way down a bustling street at night. Shiori frequently rode around in a luxury car, but there were also times when she would just go for a stroll. It was dangerous for a lady as beautiful as Shiori to walk around by herself this late at night, but Oidani knew that, due to her everyday jogging routine, that she could run faster than the majority of adult men, and that she always kept self-protection tools on her person. And if things escalated, Oidani himself would protect her. If he dashed in gallantly to save her just when she needed it most, then surely she would fall in love with him all over again.

Suddenly, Oidani realized that he had lost her. He had remained a certain distance behind, but by the time he turned the corner that she had taken, her figure was no longer anywhere to be seen. Oidani spent a bit more time searching the surroundings. Having lost her was a pity indeed, but he was used to this.

Most times, after Shiori disappeared on him, she would head back to her mansion. Thinking that she would probably be doing the same again this time, Oidani turned to head toward her mansion too. But after a while, he noticed footsteps that seemed to be tailing him.

Thinking it might just be a mere misunderstanding, Oidani turned down several side streets and back alleys, but the footsteps stayed on him persistently. As a test, Oidani stopped walking, and the footsteps stopped too.

He turned around. The lonely street dimly lit by street lights was completely empty. There wasn't a soul in sight. He dashed back the way he had come, but didn't find anyone hiding in the shadows, nor did he hear the footsteps running away.

Tilting his head puzzledly, Oidani started walking again. When he got a certain distance away, the footsteps resumed once more. Again and again, never growing closer or farther, and never showing any sign of letting up.

Chills ran down Oidani's back. He decided to change his plans for the night and head back to his own apartment instead. The footsteps still followed him the whole way, but they finally stopped when he stepped into his apartment

complex.

Oidani breathed a sigh of relief, then headed up the stairs. This apartment building had four floors, and his place was that top floor.

He ascended a flight of stairs. The plate on the landing said “1F.”

He ascended a flight of stairs again. The plate on the landing said “2F.”

He ascended a flight of stairs once more. The plate on the landing said “2F.”

“.....?”

Thinking it might have been just his misunderstanding, Oidani ascended another flight of stairs and took a good look at the plate. It said “2F.”

Fear bubbled up from within again. Oidani dashed up the stairs as fast as he could. Still “2F.”

No matter how many floors he went up, the “2F” remained the same. “2F,” “2F,” “2F,” “2F” ———

While gasping and sniveling in fear, Oidani then tried to go down the stairs. As feared, it was still “2F.” He thought he was going to go mad. This wasn’t a cheap trick like hypnosis or the power of suggestions. No, it was something far more terrifying.

The very moment when the fear finally pushed Oidani to cry out, he suddenly found himself robbed of the ability to move. The foot that was about to take the next step was frozen in mid-air, and he could not move even a finger. All sound had also disappeared. His own heartbeat seemed so frightening loud inside his own ears.

This was not merely being bound. It was something else on another level, a space so dreadfully still that it seemed like another world or like time itself had stopped.

Despite being unable to move, Oidani sensed that there was someone behind himself. Or more accurately, the person behind him was making their presence known. Footsteps gradually approached. On the landing that had gone unnaturally silent, footsteps drew closer and closer, until finally stopping right behind him.

Oidani wanted to turn around, but his neck wouldn't listen. Terror and dread swelled inside him, seemingly ballooning without end.

Then———something clasped Oidani's shoulder, and he fainted dead away as he lost control of his bladder.

The next day, other residents of the apartment complex found Oidani shivering uncontrollably on the 2nd floor landing, lying in a puddle of his own pee. That very same day, he went to the nearest police station and turned himself in, confessing everything. While trembling in fear, he swore, "I'm never going to stalk anyone ever again."

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There Was No Secret Evil-Fighting Organization (srsly?!), So I Made One
MYSELF! Volume 2

by Hagane Kurodome

Translated by Taishi Edited by S.E. Ault

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